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Quality of life in a rural community: Perceptions of the role and contributions of the small, rural community college

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**Quality of life in a rural community: Perceptions of the role and contributions of the
small, rural community college**

by

Jared William Reed

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education

Program of Study Committee:
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Debra J. VanGorp

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this dissertation. The Graduate College will ensure this dissertation is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2019

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DEDICATION

To the teachers at Fremont Public Schools
who were a part of my educational journey.
Thank you for making the world a better place.

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ABSTRACT

Community colleges play a fundamental role in higher education. They are open-access institutions, providing higher education services to individuals from a variety of backgrounds. Community colleges also provide important workforce development and training opportunities to help develop the local economy. Today, states and the federal government are increasing efforts to increase accountability in higher education. As community colleges face the challenge of responding to accountability measures, it is important for institutions to begin reexamining their role within the community.

This dissertation research explored the phenomenon of quality of life and the role of a small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life using the Community Capitals Framework and Sense of Community Theory as a theoretical framework. Qualitative data collection occurred using focus group interviews at multiple sites. This study contributes to the literature on higher education and community development by further developing an understanding of rural communities and community colleges by exploring the impact of the small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life in a rural community.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

“Is education possibly a process of trading awareness for things of lesser worth?”

— Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (1949)

Rural communities can often be characterized differently than urban and suburban environments. Many rural communities possess characteristics that are desirable to some: natural resources, physical terrain usable for recreation, and sparse population. These characteristics can make a rural community very attractive to potential residents who are interested in those characteristics. However, today, many rural communities often lack the necessary resources to adequately sustain their social and economic environments. While they seek to provide a good quality of life for their residents, many rural communities experience social and economic challenges due to lack of resources including human and financial capitals (Morgan & Lambe, 2009). These communities experience declining population, higher unemployment, and insufficient resources (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). As a result of limited availability of resources, rural communities often rely on assistance from a variety of organizations, such as non-profit groups, educational institutions, community foundations, government agencies, and public-private partnerships (Crookston & Hooks, 2012).

One of the resources available to assist rural communities in overcoming rural challenges is colleges and universities. Previous studies indicate that community colleges are an important part of rural communities (Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Garza & Eller, 1998; Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen, 2006). Community colleges are a unique part of the

American higher education landscape. For some residents, the community college serves an important role by existing as an “open-access institution,” providing access to higher education for those who are not academically prepared to pursue education at a four-year institution. For other residents, the community college represents a less expensive alternative to pursuing higher education without enrolling at a four-year institution. The Iowa Department of Education admissions policy for community colleges states:

Community colleges have an ‘open-door’ admission policy which guarantees Iowans an opportunity for educational assistance and career development regardless of previous educational attainment. To implement this policy, community colleges offer assistance in developing skills necessary for success in preparatory career and college parallel programs; supplementary services to disabled and disadvantaged students; and a variety of other support services designed to help students succeed. (Iowa Department of Education website, 2016)

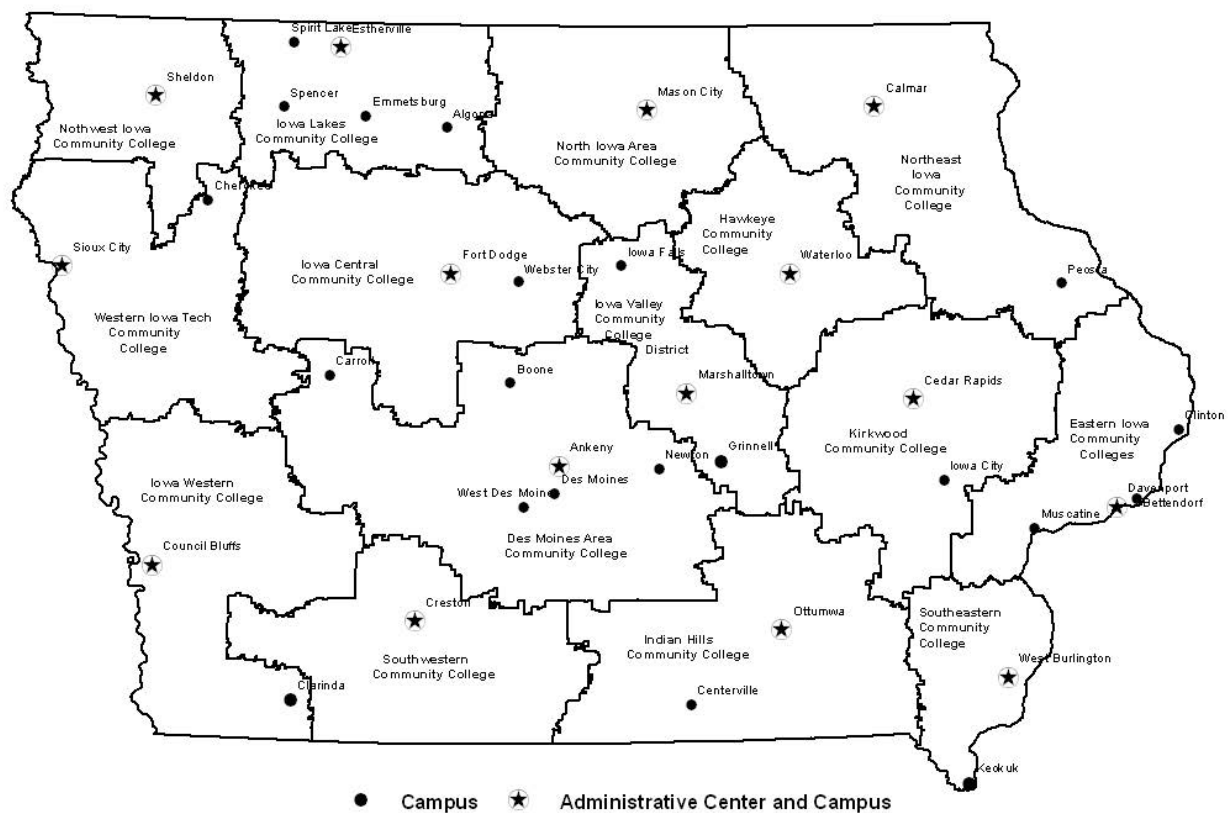
Today, different stakeholders are becoming more interested in the interactions between community colleges and the communities they serve (Goodman, 2014; Thomas, 2013). Elected officials, policy makers, administrators, and community leaders are focusing more attention on the role and impact of the community college (Thomas, 2013). State leaders, along with the federal government, are focusing more attention on accountability at the community colleges around the nation. In the past, community college performance has been evaluated predominately by reviewing performance data required by grants and programs funded at the state and federal levels.

As a result of increased efforts of state departments of education to hold community colleges accountable for their actions and activities, there is a need to better understand the broader impact of the community college on the communities served (Thomas, 2013).

Particular attention is needed for studies to further understand the impact of the community

college on the rural community (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). This study will expand the current body of research by focusing on the small, rural community college and perceptions of the institution as a contributor to quality of life in a rural community.

In the state of Iowa, there are fifteen community colleges that serve the residents of the state. Community colleges are administered independently through an elected board of trustees and receive oversight and funding from the Iowa Department of Education. Figure 1 shows the distribution of community colleges in Iowa, highlighting the campuses including the administrative center for each community college.



Source: Iowa Department of Education

Figure 1. Distribution of community colleges in Iowa

Rural community colleges and their communities

Building on the role of an open access institution, one of the contributions that community colleges make is having a mission and a purpose that is linked to serving the community where the institution is located (Thomas, 2013). This is an important contribution of the community college because it represents the complex work that community colleges perform – providing education while serving the needs of a population with unique needs (Pennington et al., 2006). Rural community colleges are important for their communities because the rural community requires a level of support from outside organizations that suburban and urban communities do not, particularly in the area of local and regional development (Garza & Eller, 1998). Another common contribution of community colleges is the administration of workforce development programs designed to assist dislocated and unemployed workers in acquiring specific job-training skills that often can lead to employment or a higher paying job within the local community. The workforce development services provided by community colleges are one of the most common characteristics of the institution itself.

In Iowa, the state is working towards a goal of building a stronger workforce through an initiative called Future Ready Iowa (About the Future Ready Iowa Initiative, n.d.). According to the Future Ready Iowa website, the initiative began after the state received a grant from the National Governors Association. In 2016, public policy officials came together to hold a summit to discuss what next steps should be taken. The governor signed Executive Order in August of 2016 and this created the Future Ready Iowa Alliance. Through the executive order, the Alliance was required to develop and recommend a plan of strategies to accomplish the goal of 70% of Iowans having some level of post-secondary

education and training by the year 2025. This plan also was required to include metrics and benchmarks.

The Future Ready Iowa initiative is a project designed to increase the number of qualified applicants to help fill the job openings in Iowa that are identified in the employment forecasts showing that careers in Iowa, in the future and today, require additional training and skills. As mentioned previously, the goal of Future Ready Iowa is for 70% of the workforce in Iowa to have post-secondary, or beyond high school, education or training by 2025. The impact of the Future Ready Iowa initiative will involve the work of the community college specialists in designing and implementing programs and services designed to meet the specific needs of the communities they serve.

An article published in January of 2017 in the *Community College Daily*, a publication of the American Association of Community Colleges, highlights the contribution of the rural community college to the economic achievements in the rural community, yet rural community colleges are often overlooked and underfunded (Ashford, 2017). Due to the mission and purpose of the institution, much of the work, activities, and interactions of the community college serves the needs of the rural community. Rural residents are able to take a class or pursue a degree at a community college, while also attending a cultural event or a political rally. If a local company makes the decision to lay off employees, those employees have access to career and technical education programs that can result in new employment opportunities.

Today, the landscape of American higher education is changing. Over the past decade, enrollment at colleges and universities fluctuated as the national economy experienced upswings and downswings. Four-year colleges and universities are experiencing

enrollment declines and are reorganizing programs, cutting existing programs with low enrollments and developing new programs in high-demand fields. These changes are the response of institutions to the changing economy and job market, and the needs of a new student population. The struggles that exist in American higher education today are not limited to four-year institutions.

Community colleges also face challenges today. These challenges are particularly troubling for rural community colleges. The percentage of community colleges in the U.S. that are identified as rural is forty-five percent (Eddy, 2007). The issues facing community colleges include declining enrollment, stagnant program offerings, and aging facilities. Furthermore, the geography of community colleges presents a challenge to some communities. Many rural residents are located in areas that experience significant travel distances to community colleges (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). In addition, the cost of providing higher education services is continuing to increase for community colleges and four-year institutions. Crookston and Hooks (2012) suggested that, compared to four year-institutions, community colleges rely more on public funding (p. 352). This need for public funding is the result of smaller levels of funding received from alumni donations, external research grants, out-of-state tuition, or endowments (p. 352).

As a result, some states are turning to performance-based funding for public institutions, particularly community colleges. This is part of an increased accountability effort on the part of states to make community colleges perform better. Accountability measures often require community colleges to track activities, record data related to these activities, and report to state and federal governments on this data (Crookston & Hooks, 2012). The argument is that by connecting state general aid and other specialized funding to

specific performance measures, it will result in community colleges achieving higher levels of student success. Much of the data produced by community colleges in response to increased accountability is quantitative in nature (Thomas, 2013). As a result, the overall view of the success of a community college is limited due to the focus of the data provided (Thomas).

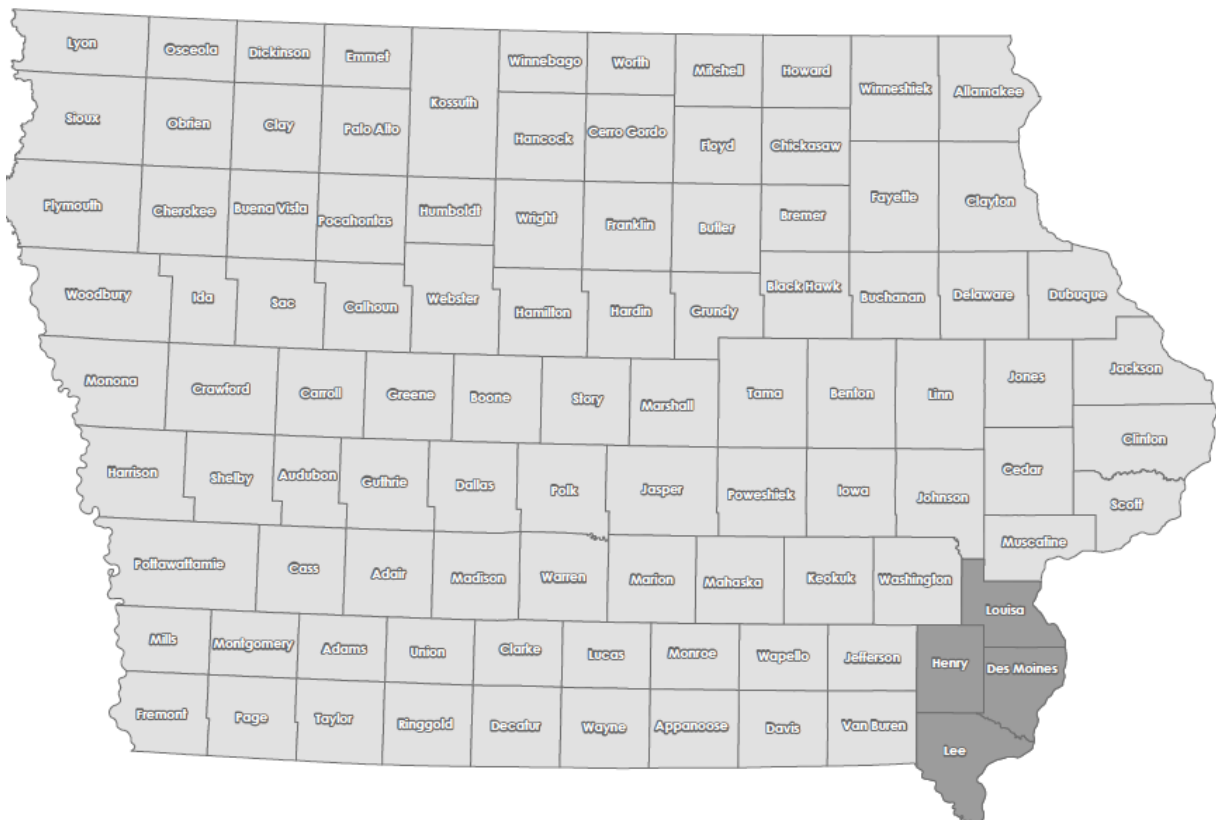
As a result of the changing landscape of American higher education and increasing pressure on institutions to perform better, there is a need to expand the understanding of the role of educational institutions in serving their communities. In particular, there is a need for better understanding of the role and contributions of a small, rural community college. Beyond providing open access and economic development, the mission and purpose of the community college becomes less clear in terms of impact on the community.

However, community college scholars consistently stress the importance of the relationship between the institution and the community it serves (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Levinson, 2005; Vaughan, 2006). This focus on the strong relationship between the institution and the community is one of the unique characteristics of the community college. As a result, this study seeks to explore the role and contributions of a small, rural community college, particularly in terms of how the institution contributes to quality of life.

Southeast Iowa

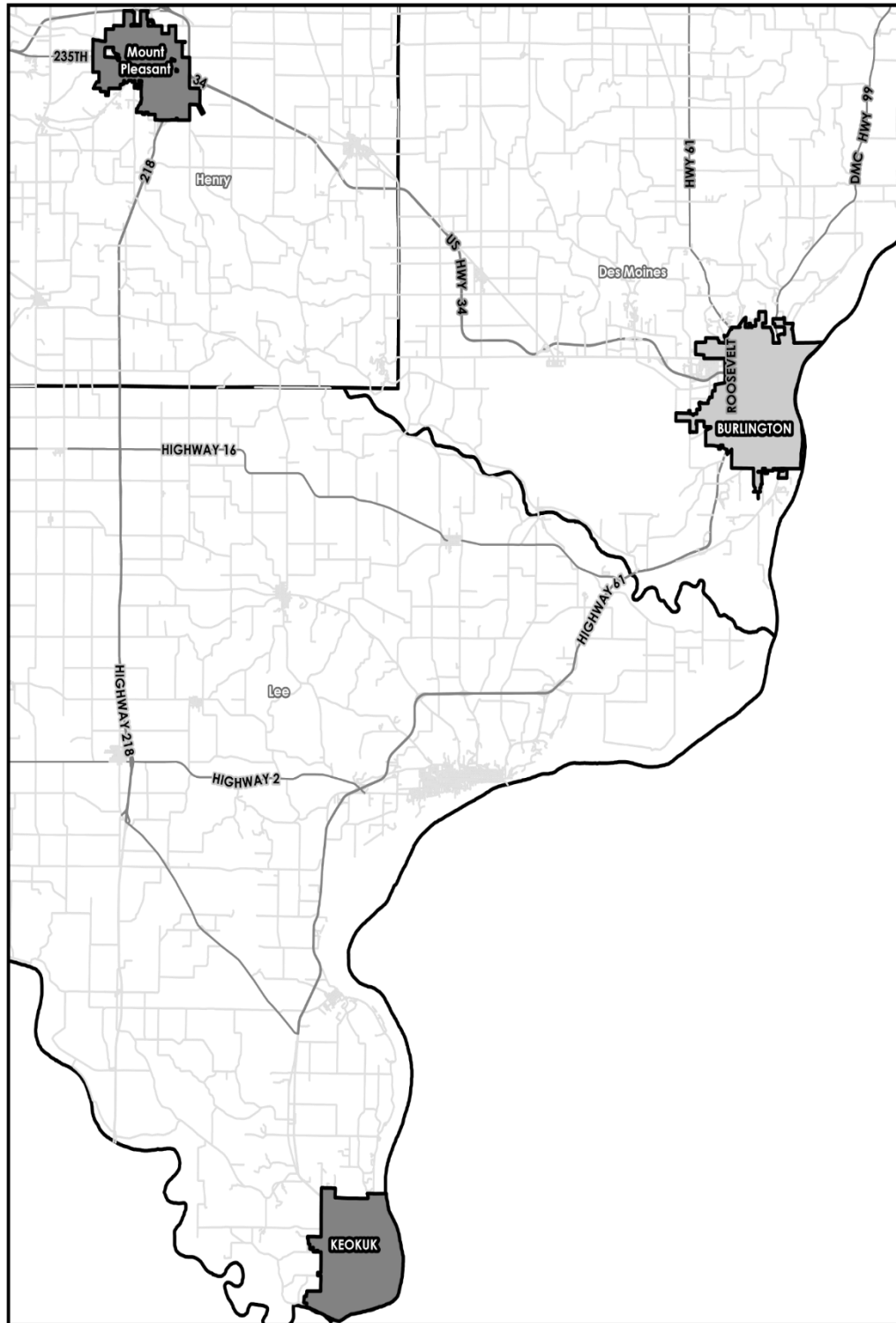
The study area included a small, rural community college that serves four counties in Southeast Iowa. Figure 2 shows the four counties as an inset of the larger map of the state of Iowa. The four counties are highlighted in dark gray. Three of the four counties border the Mississippi River while one county is entirely landlocked. When combined, the population of the four counties reaches almost 107,000 residents total (U.S. Census Bureau).

The region is served by one community college that has two campuses and one center. Figure 3 shows a close-up of the three communities, Burlington, Keokuk, and Mount Pleasant, served by a Southeastern Community College site. The college's main campus and administrative center is located in West Burlington. For this study, West Burlington and Burlington were combined into greater Burlington, referenced as Burlington in the study, since Burlington contains the majority of the population of this community and the college serves the broader community. The main campus is located in Keokuk approximately forty-five miles north of the southern campus, which is located in the southern-most county of the



Source: Des Moines County GIS Commission

Figure 2. Four counties in the Southeast Iowa region



Source: Des Moines County GIS Commission

Figure 3. Three communities of Burlington, Keokuk, and Mount Pleasant served by a Southeastern Community College site

four-county region. The center is located in the western most county, about 30 miles west of the main campus, in Mount Pleasant.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of how the small, rural community college contributes to the phenomenon of quality of life in a rural community. More specifically, this study sought to explore the concept of quality of life in a rural community college district using the perceptions of local community leaders. Previous studies have looked at quality of life in general, whereas this research was conducted to move beyond that one step by examining the role of the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life. The data collected were from individuals who either lived in the community, worked in the community, or both, and because of their role or position in the community, had been identified as community leaders in a rural community. There is a lack of research that informs us on the topic of how community leaders view the small, rural community college as a contributor to quality of life. This study will help fill a gap in the literature by providing that contribution. More specifically, the findings of this study will contribute to the literature by presenting a description and analysis of how community leaders in a rural community college district define quality of life and how the community college is perceived as a contributor to quality of life. This study will enhance the understanding of community colleges by providing additional insight into the different ways community colleges are perceived by, and therefore potentially impact, the communities they serve.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do community leaders define *rural* and *rural community*?
2. How do community leaders define *quality of life*?
3. What do community leaders perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the small, rural community college?
4. What is the role of the small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life in a rural community?

Significance

There is a need to better understand rural communities and the challenges they face. In developing this understanding, strategies and solutions can be identified and developed to assist rural communities in overcoming challenges. One of the ways this can be done is by expanding the research that exists on rural communities and small, rural community colleges. This study is significant because none could be found that explored the role of the small, rural community college in contributing to its communities' quality of life. The need for this study was brought on partially by increased accountability at the state and federal levels which has increased the level of attention being placed on the work performed by community colleges. Additionally, the need for this study was brought on by existing challenges in rural communities - population decline, rapidly changing economies, declining physical infrastructure, and higher rates of unemployment (Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Pennington et al., 2006). For rural community leaders and community college leaders, it is crucial to become more informed on the role of community colleges in order to be able to articulate the contributions of community colleges to a broader audience of stakeholders.

To better communicate the role and benefits of the community college to a broader audience, community college practitioners and advocates need a deeper understanding of the comprehensive nature of the work performed by the small rural community college. This will enable community college leaders to better articulate the contributions of the community college to members of the audience who may not be as informed as they could be. Often, community college leaders find that members of the community have a limited understanding of the work performed by the community college (Mellow & Heelan, 2008). Cavan (1995) noted, “The general community and political leaders do not fully comprehend the mission, the variety of services provided, and the successes of the community college” (p. 14).

Furthermore, this study is significant because it contributes to existing literature by helping to provide a definition of the meaning of the concept of quality of life. Developing a better understanding of how rural community leaders define quality of life and how they perceive the community college is important to understanding rural communities and the ways in which rural community colleges are viewed as contributors to success and growth in rural communities. Understanding how community leaders define rural, rural community, quality of life, and examining their perceptions of how the small, rural community college contributes to that definition of quality of life in a rural community will hopefully increase the understanding of the impact of community colleges in a rural community.

Research Design

This study was designed as a case study using qualitative data collection techniques. Case study research is an empirical method of inquiry that investigates a single, specific, phenomenon within a specific context. The methodological framework for this study involved conducting this study as a single case study. This involves studying a case in an

everyday, current setting (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2016). Case study methods require the use of multiple sources of data for the researcher to provide a thick description of the phenomenon being studied.

In this study, the case study methodology was appropriate because the study sought to provide an in-depth examination of a specific phenomenon, the concept of quality of life, and how it exists in a rural community. The study's research design involved qualitative data collected from community leaders within the community college district. The district has geographic boundaries consisting of county borders. The selection of the case was based on the uniqueness of the demographics within the district's geographic boundaries. The case is a bounded case, bound by time and place (the community college district and the population that resides within the district).

The community college that serves Southeast Iowa is located within the four-county district in which this case study research was conducted. The participants selected for participation in this study were selected using purposeful sampling methods. The selection of the participants was based on their current or past role in the community. Participants were: (1) 18 years of age or older, and (2) either currently living in or working in the community or had worked in the community. The participants were selected based on their knowledge of and experience with the community and whether they had some level of current or previous engagement in the community. Snowball sampling was also used in identifying participants who met the criteria (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The data collection methods used in this study were focus group interviews (Patton). The study sought to collect data from participants who were selected based on their positions in the community.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by a two-part theoretical framework including the Community Capitals Framework (Emery & Flora, 2006) and Sense of Community Theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The Community Capitals Framework is a tool for communities to assist them in the process of identifying resources and developing ways to utilize those resources to strengthen the place of the community in different ways. Emery and Flora (2006) presented seven capitals in this framework: natural capital, cultural capital, human capital, financial capital, built capital, social capital, and political capital.

Natural capital refers to elements that occur naturally in a community – geographic isolation, natural resources, the environment, and natural beauty. Cultural capital refers to the “way people ‘know the world’ and how they act within it” based on the influences around them (Emery & Flora, 2006, p. 21). Human capital refers to the information, ideas, skills and abilities to increase an individual’s economic and cultural power (Emery & Flora). Financial capital refers to wealth and the assets that are available for opportunities to grow the community’s ability to grow itself (Emery & Flora). Built capital is an all-encompassing term used to reference infrastructure needed so that the community is able to exist physically and culturally (Emery & Flora). Social capital refers to the ways in which individuals and groups interact with each other through connectivity (Emery & Flora). And finally, political capital refers to the ways in which people act to contribute to the community in a significant way (Emery & Flora).

Limitations

This study was conducted with several limitations. The first limitation to this study was the generalizability of study findings to other rural communities. The findings of a case

study are limited in explaining phenomena under study to the case itself. In other words, the researcher is limited in applying the findings presented in this study to other communities because the data collected are specific to the case presented in this research. Additional study is necessary to explain the phenomena under study in other communities because communities present unique qualities that not all communities have in common. This research, however, contributes to the literature by providing another study specific to a rural community.

The second limitation of this study is the limitation of bias (Creswell, 2013). The participants in the focus group interviews in this study were also residents of the community. Some of the participants were alumni of the institution under examination in this study. As a result, it is important to note that some of the responses could contain bias.

The third limitation of this study was the lack of racial/ethnic diversity in the participant sample. The participants were all Caucasian. There were no participants in this study who were of racial or ethnic minority status. This limitation is significant because it limits the perspectives presented by participants. It is possible that a participant from a racial or ethnic minority group could present a different perspective on the role of the small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined for use in this study:

Community leader: A person who has lived in, worked in, or both, in a community and has a level of understanding of the community as a result of professional or civic involvement in the community. Due to the nature of involvement, a person has a position, or role, in the community that could be described as a leadership role.

Rural community: Hancks (2011) cited The Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion University of Pennsylvania as the source of two definitions for the term rural community. The first definition, provided by the United States Census Bureau, refers to any community with up to 2,500 people. The second definition refers to a community of up to 25,000 people living outside a metropolitan area. For this study, the second definition is more appropriate because it is a more representative description of the communities investigated in this case study.

Sense of place: Based on Hay (1988), a personal connection with place, created from time living in and being involved in a community, which is made up of three elements: perception – awareness, attitudes, and memories towards a place; emotions – feelings, preferences, and values towards a place; and experiences – bodily and sensory contacts, insider/outsider experience, with a place.

Small, rural community college: A community college with an unduplicated headcount below 2,500 serving students from urban, suburban, and rural areas given the location of the campus in a rural-like setting

Quality of Life: The Oxford Dictionary defines Quality of Life as: “The standard of health, comfort, and happiness experienced by an individual or group.” This definition was used to operationalize the term Quality of Life in this study.

Positionality

My positionality was fully disclosed to the study participants. I am not a native of Iowa. Part of my curiosity in this topic stems from the fact that I am not a native to this region and I never was a student at a community college. Even though I reside in Lee County, Iowa, which is part of the study area, I was born and raised in a small, rural, community in western Michigan. I have an appreciation for rural communities and small

towns because of my experience having spent my time growing up in one. I grew up in a small town with a population of approximately 4,000. After graduating from high school, I moved away to another town to attend college. The college town where I lived while I was a student working on my bachelor's degree had a population of approximately 25,000. In 2005, I moved to another state to attend graduate school. I chose Macomb, Illinois, because it was a small town with a population of approximately 20,000, with an even smaller university population.

After completing my master's degree in 2009, I started a professional position with the city of West Burlington in the Southeast Iowa region. I worked in this capacity in the field of community development services for two years before returning to the college classroom as an adjunct instructor. In my position in community development, I continued to develop my appreciation for the small, rural community. My interests in better understanding rural communities continued to grow.

In my current position as a community college practitioner, the work that I am responsible for intersects economic and workforce development with student services. Part of my job is to build and maintain relationships with community organizations and industry so that I am better informed on helping students acquire training and skills to be able to enter jobs in the Southeast Iowa region. Cognizant of my positionality as described previously, I purposefully worked to remain neutral and unbiased while conducting this research.

I am an employee of the community college under study in this research. This information was presented to study participants before the focus group interviews were conducted. I felt it was necessary to make participants aware of this as a form of

transparency related to the purpose and intent of the study along with the opportunity to address any bias related to this.

In an effort to be unbiased in the design and implementation of the study, copies of the transcripts produced from audio recordings were provided to the participants. Participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy and to provide feedback to the researcher through the process known as member checking.

Summary

This chapter discussed rural communities and rural community colleges and the relationship between the two. It also provided an overview of the Community Capitals Framework, outlined the purpose of this study in exploring the phenomenon of quality of life, and the significance of this exploration. Chapter 2 will provide a review of existing literature looking at rural communities, rural community colleges, sense of place, and quality of life.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study was conducted as a qualitative case study to explore the term, quality of life, as a phenomenon in our society. Specific focus was given to looking at how the small, rural community college is perceived as a contributor to quality of life. This chapter begins with a presentation of the theoretical framework used in this study and concludes with a review of relevant literature in the areas of rural communities, rural community colleges, sense of place and quality of life. Literature for this study was obtained through the use of academic search engines, including Google Scholar and Academic Search Premier. To help aid in the research process, the following keywords were used to locate existing peer-reviewed literature: rural, rurality, rural community, sense of place, and quality of life

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by a two-part theoretical framework. The first part is the Community Capitals Framework (Emery & Flora, 2006). This framework is a tool for communities to assist them in the process of identifying resources and developing ways to utilize those resources to strengthen the place of the community in different ways.

Community Capitals Framework

Emery and Flora (2006) present seven capitals in this framework: natural capital, cultural capital, human capital, financial capital, built capital, social capital, and political capital. Natural capital refers to elements that occur naturally in a community – geographic isolation, natural resources, the environment (weather and climate), amenities, and natural beauty. Cultural capital refers to the “way people ‘know the world’ and how they act within it” based on the influences around them (Emery & Flora, 2006, p. 21). Human capital refers

to the information, ideas, skills and abilities to increase an individual's economic and cultural power (Emery & Flora). Social capital refers to the ways in which individuals and groups interact with each other through connectivity (Emery & Flora). Political capital refers to the ways in which people act to contribute to the community in a significant way (Emery & Flora). Financial capital refers to wealth and the assets that are available for opportunities to grow the community's ability to grow itself (Emery & Flora). Finally, built capital is an all-encompassing term used to reference infrastructure needed so that the community is able to exist physically and culturally (Emery & Flora).

The Community Capitals Framework is a way by which community leaders and organizations can peel away the layers of the pieces of society that combine to make communities exist in order to understand how different elements of the natural and cultural environment come together to create communities in the first place. In order to understand the Community Capitals Framework, it is important to look at communities as places. Geographers often talk about "place" as a central theme in the study of the discipline. Two well-known geographers, Knox and Marston (2011), suggested that places are "...socially constructed", meaning that people apply their own meanings to specific locations based on the value that location has for specific individuals (p. 189).

The Community Capitals Framework as a tool contributes to developing a better understanding of communities by providing a way for scholars to study and discuss the different factors that contribute to the construction of a community. The different factors refer to different elements that are added together to create the fabric of what a community is. The natural capital is the physical environment that occurs naturally in our society.

The natural capital is the part of the environment in which the other capitals are added to in order to create community. The built capital refers to physical structures, such as buildings, roadways, bridges, sidewalks, houses, etc., that are featured on the natural landscape. The physical environment, natural and built, is the starting point for which man-made society is constructed. The Community Capitals Framework helps scholars understand the intersection of the natural environment and the cultural, or man-made, environment by examining the cultural environment using the different capitals presented. Specific focus can be given to human capital, social capital, economic capital, and political capital in order to understand how human activity contributes to a changing physical or natural landscape and helps to create communities as we know them and see them.

The second part of the theoretical framework used to guide this study was the Sense of Community Theory originally presented by McMillan in 1976 (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It was McMillan and Chavis (1986) who proposed a definition which helped operationalize the theory of sense of community based on four elements. The four elements that create the definition and theory of sense of community are: *membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.*

Sense of Community Theory

Membership is a feeling that one has invested parts of oneself to become a member and, therefore, has a right to belong (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It is a feeling of belonging, of being a part of something. The second element is *influence*, which is a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and that the group matters to its members (McMillan & Chavis). Members of a community have to feel a trustworthiness among members in order to be able to speak freely within the community (McMillan & Chavis). This ability to speak

freely is what helps build the spirit within a community (McMillan, 1996). Members are attracted to a community in direct relation to their emotional sense of it (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The third element is *integration and fulfillment of needs*. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group, or the community (McMillan & Chavis). Lastly, the fourth element of the theory of sense of community is *shared emotional connection*. This is the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis). Based on the four elements, the theory of sense of community is defined as:

Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together.
(McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9)

From the review of the Community Capitals Framework and the Sense of Community Theory, it can be demonstrated that communities are complex social structures with many different parts put together. Community colleges are complex organizations, too. Thus, it can be said that the relationship between community colleges and the population and community they serve can be characterized as an ebb and flow due to the nature of the mission of the community college. The community college has a specific mission and purpose related to economic development through the development of workforce development programs, K-12 partnerships, and providing career and technical degree programs. This mission has been expanding to include community development as well (Hoffman, 2016).

The importance of studying the intersection of geographic space and culture has been documented by scholars over the last several decades. This line of research has become steadfastly relevant over the last decade due to the increasingly globalized manner of our society. By examining the ways in which people interact with the physical environment around them, scholars have sought to explore the attitudes and emotions of people and their feelings towards the geographic space around them.

This finding was significant to this study because the topic of quality of life often involves people's feelings, emotions, and thoughts. There is an element of place and geography that is inherent to having a better understanding of quality of life and how people define this term based on the community that exists around them.

Rural Communities in the United States

The terms “rural” and “urban” are used frequently in conversation by people to describe the world around them. The discussion around what the terms “urban” and “rural” mean has been ongoing for decades (Halfacree, 1993). One of the effects of using these terms frequently to describe places is that people create their own definitions, their own images, of what the two terms mean (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). Often, when people hear or see the word “rural,” certain images are likely to come to mind—farms, small towns, what might be American “Main Street”, and quiet neighborhoods. Crookston (2015) stated, “Rural America is extremely diverse and not easily captured by any single depiction” (p. 7). Goodman (2014) noted, “Each rural community in America is uniquely different” (p. 34).

Rural areas of the United States represent over 85% of the nation's geography and contain only 15% of the population (Cejda, 2012; Miller & Kissinger, 2007). Rural places in this country were once sought after by families seeking “fertile fields, prosperous

employment, and opportunities for new lives” (Jacquet, Guthrie, & Jackson, 2017, p. 603).

Today, however, this part of the country has often been characterized by low levels of educational attainment beyond graduation from high school, decreasing population levels, increasing poverty levels, limited economic growth, and limited access to cultural events (Eddy, 2007; Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011; Miller & Kissinger, 2007; von Reichert, Cromartie, & Arthun, 2014;). Rural communities are experiencing aging population growth, particularly, as younger residents move out of the community for other opportunities and decide to stay away (Crookston & Hooks, 2012; Eddy, 2007).

Many rural communities are struggling to maintain population as people migrate from rural areas to more urban and suburban communities (Barcus & Simmons, 2013; Jacquet et al., 2017). Previous studies showed that population migration is affecting rural communities and their ability to sustain their existence (Barcus & Simmons, 2013; Jacquet et al., 2017; Redlin, Aguiar, Langelett, & Warmann, 2010; von Reichert et al., 2014). These studies describe a scenario that is becoming common among rural communities—young people reaching a point in their lives where they leave the community for different opportunities and do not return (Reichert et al., 2014).

As a result of the challenges, rural communities are often found to be struggling to maintain their economic and social development (Crookston, 2015; Garza & Eller, 1998; Korsching & Allen, 2004). Many rural communities have experienced significant transformation over time (Barcus & Simmons, 2013; Jacquet et al., 2017). Many of these places have experienced change from bustling and thriving small communities to what could be described as ghost towns (Jacquet et al., 2017).

Rural communities are experiencing significant transformation (Barcus & Simmons, 2013). Previous studies have suggested that the economic decline in rural America has reached a point where poverty, declining population totals, and geographical remoteness are identified as significant features of rural America (Christy & Figueroa, 1990; Crookston, 2015; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). As people move away from rural areas, population decreases have a way of impacting poverty and economic growth efforts (Crookston, 2015). The economic purchasing power of individuals decreases as the population ages, companies face shortages of qualified workers, businesses close due to lack of customer activity, and infrastructure starts to decline because communities do not have access to tax revenue to make necessary improvements (Eddy, 2007).

Rural communities often are described as places where people have close relationships with others, residents will help each other in times of need, crime rates are low, and there is a slower pace of life (Plein, 2011). Bradshaw (2008, as cited in Plein, 2011), stated, “Place communities such as rural small towns are typically heralded as model communities where social cohesion rules—strong patterns of social interaction based on long-lasting and deep personal relationships” (p. 6).

Rural Community Colleges

Community colleges often have a noticeable relationship with the communities they serve (Torres et al., 2013). . In the United States, there are 553 rural community college districts and 922 rural campuses, and this figure represents almost 60% of all community college campuses across the nation (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). Over 9 million students attended community colleges in 2000-2001, with 34% of these students attending a rural community college (Hardy & Katsinas). Rural community colleges “...serve changing

student populations, the result of growing numbers of non-traditional students, dislocated workers, and individuals looking to increase their work skills (Howley, Chavis, & Kester, 2013, p. 2).

Small, rural community colleges are defined as those institutions with less than 2,500 annual unduplicated enrollments (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). These community colleges show a mean enrollment per district of 1,699 and a mean enrollment per campus of 1,155 (Hardy & Katsinas). Rural communities often rely more heavily than urban communities on the community college to function as a catalyst for social and economic development in the region (Torres et al., 2013). Miller and Deggs (2012) stated that "...rural settings typically have lower education completion levels, higher than national average obesity rates, poor health, and lower than national average wage earning" (p. 331). Citing Drabenstott, Novack, and Weiler (2004), Torres et al. (2013) noted there are important elements that rural regions need in order to grow that require the involvement of the community college: "...engagement by higher education, an entrepreneurial culture, and educational and training programs that serve the region's needs" (p. 4).

Rural community colleges are different from their urban counterparts. Rural community colleges face a unique set of challenges that differentiate them from community colleges in urban settings. Previous studies have shown that the discussion of the challenges facing rural community colleges is ongoing (Cejda, 2012; Eddy, 2007; Garza & Eller, 1998; Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Miller & Kissinger, 2007; Torres et al., 2013; Vineyard, 1979). In a 1979 study, Vineyard noted that some of the challenges facing rural community colleges are "...the impoverishment of cultural, social, and recreational services in the area; attracting and developing staff; housing of students; lower educational levels of parents and other

adults” (p. 34). Understanding the role of the community college in a rural community is important to helping students be successful in the college environment after they graduate from high school (Hlinka, Mobelini, & Giltner, 2015).

In addition to rural community colleges experiencing challenges that are sometimes different than those experienced by urban community colleges, the rural community college serves a unique role, different from the urban community college (Howley et al., 2013). Previous studies have documented the role of the rural community college as a cultural center, sometimes being the only source of cultural activities and cultural awareness for students and residents (Cejda, 2012; Howley et al., 2013; Miller & Kissinger, 2007; Pennington et al., 2006). Other studies have shown that community colleges in rural areas experience a challenge of providing services to a population that is spread out over a larger geographic area (Cejda, 2012; Pennington et al., 2006). Geography is a challenge for rural community colleges for several reasons. Crookston and Hooks (2012) noted that “...many rural Americans reside in areas that are not within reasonable commuting distance to a community college” (p. 351). Students face additional barriers such as increased transportation costs when they must travel significant distances in a rural area in order to pursue higher education (Howley et al., 2013). Other studies have noted that the limitations caused by geography may create barriers for the rural community college to recruit and retain faculty and staff (Cejda, 2010; Pennington et al., 2006).

Rural community college leaders often face the challenge of reducing the barrier of geography for students. In a previous study, this challenge was documented as a primary reason that rural community college administrators had pursued developing on-campus housing facilities at their institutions (Moeck, Hardy, & Katsinas, 2007). Housing services at

rural community colleges can help alleviate the barrier of geographic distance for rural students and also to help the institution to recruit and retain students (Moeck et al.)

Rural communities often lack amenities that are desirable, such as shopping malls, fine dining, and other goods and services. Rural community colleges located significant distances from larger populated areas tend to face difficulty in being able to attract and retain qualified employees (Katsinas & Miller, 1998; Pennington et al., 2006). Cejda 2010 confirmed previous research that rural community colleges often have trouble in attracting and retaining faculty. Cejda referenced a 2007 survey cited in Rankin (2009) which indicated that nearly half (48%) of academic affairs administrators at rural community colleges expressed difficulty in attracting and hiring qualified full-time instructors.

Rural community colleges experience “economies of scale” according to Cejda (2010). Faculty at rural community colleges experience taking on duties that are not related to providing instruction, such as covering shifts in an academic tutoring program because of a lack of a director (Cejda). Oftentimes, full-time faculty at rural institutions are the only faculty teaching in their disciplines because there are fewer local individuals with the necessary credentials to teach in the rural community college (Murray, 2007, as cited in Cejda, 2010, p. 34).

Scholars have noted that the rural community college can often be identified as a cultural and economic center in the rural community (Cejda, 2012; Miller & Kissinger, 2007; Torres et al., 2013). In rural communities, churches and schools often function as sites of social interaction for people (Miller & Kissinger, 2007). Rural community colleges can function as a tool to bring people together (Miller & Kissinger). This role is hampered when the rural community service area is a larger geographic area (Pennington et al., 2006).

Studies have documented that the impact of the services provided by a rural community college are felt more intensely than those of their urban or suburban counterparts (Miller & Kissinger, 2007). This is partly due to the economic challenges of rural communities (Pennington et al, 2006). The tax base in a rural community is often less diverse than that of an urban area and, as a result, the rural community relies more on the services and activities provided by the college (Pennington et al.). This phenomenon has led to the activities and services provided by the rural community college to face higher levels of scrutiny from students and residents (Miller & Kissinger, 2007). This reflects a demand by rural community residents for actions by the community college to address rural community challenges (Miller & Kissinger, 2007).

Rural community college students sometimes encounter the need to make decisions in life that are different from their urban counterparts that can influence their educational success or failure. In a more recent study conducted by Hlinka, Mobelini, and Giltner (2015, p. 2), students at a rural community college in the Appalachia region were surveyed and three ideas were presented that reflected what the students felt impacted their ability to be successful: (a) the need to be “coddled” vs. the need to “cut the strings”; (b) the “push of encouragement vs. the “pull” of family responsibilities; and (c) the decision to stay vs. the decision to leave the area. These ideas are important for rural community college administrators to be aware of because the ideas can influence types of programs and services the rural institution could provide to support rural students (Hlinka et al.).

Previous studies have noted that rural community colleges provide a wide range of services to the community: adult literacy programs, academic transfer opportunities, social and health programs, workforce skill enhancement, and leisure programs (Cejda, 2012;

Hardy & Katsinas, 2007; Katsinas & Miller, 1998; Miller & Tuttle, 2007; Pennington et al., 2006). These services are necessary because rural community colleges serve changing student populations (Howley, Chavis, & Kester, 2013). Another important service provided by the rural community college is vocational programming (Katsinas & Miller, 1998). Vocational programs are an essential part of the community college work because of the relationship between the institution and the community it serves. Academic programs, particularly vocational programs, are often developed and implemented with input from industry leaders (Katsinas & Miller, 1998; Miller & Tuttle, 2007).

Miller and Kissinger (2007) discussed the contribution of the rural community college in “noncredit programs” (p. 29). They identified four programs in particular: “leisure education, cultural enrichment, economic development, and continuing education” (p. 29). The economic development contributions of the rural community college have been broken down into distinct components. Rural community colleges provide economic development activities in the following ways: contract training, small business development, and local economic planning (Miller & Kissinger, 2007; Miller & Tuttle, 2007). Contract training is a term applied to trainings and courses developed by the community college specifically for a business to use for in-house employees at the business. Contract training is paid for by the business and developed by the community college (Miller & Tuttle, 2007). Small business development is a service provided by the community college to the region that it serves (Miller & Tuttle). Residents can utilize the community college as a resource to learn how to start a business, receive technical assistance developing a business plan, and learn leadership skills to improve managing employees at existing businesses (Miller & Tuttle). Rural community colleges are also involved in local economic planning activities. This can include

monitoring changes in economic policy and local employment and workforce trends and participating in economic growth activities (Miller & Tuttle).

Quality of Life

Quality of life is a phrase that is used frequently in our society. This term is often used to explain a level of happiness or satisfaction that someone has towards life. Quality of life is a complex concept that can refer to material and immaterial components of life (Brauer & Dymitrow, 2014). Due to the reality of quality of life being defined broadly, it is a “delicate concept that is difficult to implement in a complex reality” (Brauer & Dymitrow, 2014, p. 31). Another study described the term quality of life as “an obscure concept” (Barcaccia et al., 2013, p. 185). Previous studies have used a broad range of factors to define and identify what is meant by the term quality of life. This range of factors contributes to the confusion that quality of life does not have a single, uniform definition. In previous research, the term Quality of Life (QoL) has been identified, or defined, using factors such as housing, services, amenities, employment, health, and sense of community belonging (Eby, Kitchen, & Williams, 2012). Research on QoL can be conducted from different geographic scales (Eby et al.). In other words, studies examining quality of life can be conducted at different levels of analysis. In addition, QoL can be measured using different measurement techniques (qualitative vs. quantitative) (Eby et al.). Previous studies have studied social capital (Veenstra et al., 2005), environmental perceptions (Wakefield & McMullan, 2005), and sense of place as it relates to QoL and health (Williams et al., 2010).

In another previous study, the “...concept of quality of life encompasses how an individual measures the ‘goodness’ of multiple aspects of life” (Theofilou, 2013, p. 151). The “goodness” in life is what is elusive in terms of a definition. People have the freedom to

pick and choose what “good” means to them and this is often the case with trying to understand what is meant by quality of life. This is part of the discussion around the challenge that comes with trying to define the term quality of life (Theofilou).

Examination of previous studies on the topic of quality of life has revealed that defining the term quality of life has involved subjective and objective components (Camfield & Skevington, 2008; Campbell et al., 1976; Diener, 1999; Theofilou, 2013). George and Bearon (1980, as cited in Farquhar, 1995, p. 1,440) presented four dimensions of the concept of quality of life: general health and functional status; socioeconomic status; life satisfaction; and self-esteem. Two of these dimensions are identified as objective and two are identified as subjective components of quality of life. In another previous study, Logsdon et al. (2002) also noted four dimensions to defining quality of life, as it relates to adults with cognitive impairments: “behavioral competence, the objective environment, psychological well-being, and perceived quality of life” (p. 510). This illustrates that scholars have struggled with coming up with a definition of quality of life over time. Previous studies have suggested the challenges with defining the concept of quality of life have been ongoing for decades.

Based on the work of Brock (1993), Diener and Suh (1997) suggested that there are three significant approaches to determining quality of life. The first approach describes quality of life using characteristics and parameters put in place by things like religion and philosophy (Diener & Suh). In this approach, the level of quality of life is influenced by normative ideals that are determined by organized religion or philosophical teachings (Diener & Suh). The second approach to determining quality of life is based on individual preferences and the desire of individuals to have a good life. In this approach, people will acquire the things that make them happy given the amount of resources that they have

(Diener & Suh). People will use the resources that they have in their possession to get the things that they determine will provide them quality of life. What those things are is determined by the individual. Finally, the third approach to determining quality of life speaks to the experience of individuals. In this approach, if a person believes and feels that his or her life is attractive, decent, and pleasing, then it must be so (Diener & Suh).

For some scholars, the process of defining quality of life is based on personal assessments of one's own life (Campbell et al., 1976). Citing a World Health Organization project that conceptualized quality of life, Camfield and Skevington (2008) offered the following definition of quality of life:

An individual's perception of their position in life, in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept, affected in a complex way by the person's physical health, psychological state, level of independence, social relationships and their relationship to salient features of their environment. (p. 765)

Defining quality of life with a single, uniform definition has been difficult for scholars over time. Part of this difficulty is due to the complex nature of the term itself. To define quality of life as a concept means to apply meaning to the phrase. The way in which people apply meaning to words and phrases is often derived from their individual perspective (Farquhar, 1995). Logsdon et al. (2002) stated, "Quality of life is an elusive concept that has been defined and assessed in a variety of ways, depending on the context in which it is used" (p. 510). Over the course of time, scholars have concluded that defining quality of life means bringing together subjective components and objective components (Brauer & Dymitrow, 2014; Logsdon et al., 2002; Theofilou, 2013).

Previous research studies have focused on defining quality of life as it relates to patients in a healthcare setting (Apolone & Mosconi, 1998; Farquhar, 1995; Logsdon, 2002; Theofilou, 2013). Quality of life in a healthcare context has been referred to as Health-Related Quality of Life (Apolone & Mosconi, 1998). It has been noted that scholars have limited perspective of quality of life and what it is but note that it does contain subjective and objective measures (Apolone & Mosconi, 1998; Farquhar, 1995).

According to Apolone and Mosconi (1998), health-related quality of life refers to “...the measure of the patients’ functioning, well-being and general health perception in each of three domains: physical, psychological, and social” (p. 65). These authors provided a definition that contains objective (physical) and subjective (psychological and social) components, which is similar to how other definitions have been constructed. This is another example of the discussion around the difficulty in actually defining quality of life because “people value different things” (Farquhar, 1995). Other scholars noted that health-related quality of life is discussed mainly as it relates to “...the functional effects of an illness and its consequent therapy upon a patient, as perceived by the patient” (Camfield & Skevington, 2008, p. 766).

Sense of Place

Places do not simply exist in society. They begin as absolute or specific locations. Absolute locations are geographic, or spatial, locations that can be identified using coordinates and a latitude and longitude grid system (Knox & Marston, 2011). Human interaction with absolute locations, and the cultural development that occurs at that location, is what is identified as a place.

The discussion about the concept of “place” and what it means has a long history in the academic literature (Agnew, 1987; Agnew, 1989; Entrikin, 1991; Pow 2009; Tuan, 1977). Cultural geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), introduced the idea that people, in some way, become emotionally attached to specific locations. Pow (2009, 96) suggested that “the concept of place is important due to its ability to be used as an instrument in the facilitation of social change.” In addition, Larsen & Johnson (2012) noted:

Place is commonly understood as the areal context for objects, events, and actions (Entrikin, 1991). Summarizing contemporary work, Agnew (1987) described place as possessing the three dimensions of locale (the setting for social action and interaction), locality (the arrangement of settings relative to broader scales of political-economic processes), and sense of place (the attachments and meanings associated with locale). (p. 636)

Nanzer (2004) contributed to this discussion by suggesting that “...the concept of ‘sense of place’ refers to the manner in which humans relate to or feel about the environments in which they live” (p. 363). The attachment that people give to certain places depends on the role that places play in the individual lives. In other words, if a person works in city A, but lives in city B, it is possible that the emotional attachment given to both cities could be different based on how the individual relates to either place. Building on this idea, Knox and Marston (2011) posited that “...places are socially constructed – given different meanings by different groups for different purposes” (p. 189).

Nanzer (2004) noted that “...place refers to a location or space that has gained special meaning through personal, group, or cultural processes” (p. 364). People identify absolute locations, using latitude and longitude coordinate grid system, and construct a place by developing feelings and giving meaning to that location. As people attach emotions to locations, locations develop meaning in the lives of people (Knox & Marston, 2011; Nanzer,

2004). For example, if someone relocates to a new city to attend graduate school, and has never been to that new city before, the individual might develop an emotional connection to that new city because of the personal experience of attending graduate school in that town.

Places are constantly under social construction because people respond to the opportunities and constraints of their particular location (Knox & Marston, 2011). As people live and work in places, they gradually impose themselves on their environment, modifying and adjusting it to suit their needs (Knox & Marston). In other words, places are both centers of meaning for people and the frameworks for their actions and behavior. Places are constructed by their inhabitants from their own subjective point of view.

Place-making

Most people identify with places as part of their personal identity, drawing on particular images and particular histories of places in order to lend distinctiveness to both their individuality and their sense of community. Anderson (2010, as cited in Baidur, 2014), stated that "...places make up the fabric of cultural life, and we cannot escape places since they are all around us" (p. 35). There is an inherent connection between humans and their environments (Cheschmehzangi, 2014). People are distinctly drawn to interacting with the physical and natural environment around them, even only if to use the physical or natural environment as a canvas through which to function socially, whether through work, business, or recreational activities. This interaction might take the form of functioning in a work-place environment, shopping in a central business district, or hiking in a state park or recreation area. Nonetheless, the creation of places requires human activity (Pow 2009) because "...we are the ones who delimit an area of physical space with rules about what should or should not take place" (p. 96).

Place provides a mental instrument by which human beings can organize reality (Pow). As the cultural world becomes more complicated by new ways of communicating and conducting daily business, geographic space organized into built places allows human beings to organize and make sense of chaos occurring in their individual lives. In other words, places are built and created in the physical environment for the purposes of providing a means for people to function socially. Human activity results in the creation and development of places in society. According to Darvill (2014), "...one thing the human species seems particularly good at is finding ways of giving meaning to the places they occupy" (p. 462). The idea that human activity creates places has been presented in other studies (Jones & Evans, 2011; Tuan, 1977). Kaplan and Recoquillon (2014) stated the following:

Place-making begins with the built environment, the landscape of buildings, streets, signs, and physical features through which a place is easily recognized, and which can transmit considerable meaning to both insiders and outsiders. Places are also made through the daily practices of socializing, shopping, walking, working, hustling, and worshipping. Place identities are rarely fixed in time as the influence of the past seeps into the present. Moreover, places do not exist in isolation but are surrounded by other places that bring the place identity into relief. Finally, there is no singular place identity as each place comprehends multiple meanings defined by different social networks. (p. 33)

In an effort to create places and make sense of social activity in their own lives, humans add their own understandings onto "abstract space" in order to create and organize their individual perceptions of space (Jones & Evans, 2011, p. 2,320). Place is a constantly shifting set of social relations brought together at a particular location (Jones & Evans, 2011; Massey, 1994). As a result, places take on multiple identities, depending on the individual making the place (Jones & Evans, 2011). In addition, Harvey (1993, as cited in Jones &

Evans, 2012) suggested that both space and place can be seen as socially constructed concepts. This supports the idea suggested by Knox and Marston (2011), that people “socially construct” places within their individual lives. Absolute locations, or specific locations, are manufactured into places through the lives of individuals. A student moving from a small town to attend college in a nearby college town is likely to create a meaning for the town in which he/she attends college. The physical environment of the college town is the setting for the creation of place by the student attending the nearby college or university in that college town.

Place identity

Mendoza and Moren-Alegret (2012) stated, “Sometimes people can be moved (i.e. emotionally touched) when feeling attachment to a place, and people can move (i.e. migrate) from one place of residence to another” (p. 762). Sometimes people develop an emotional connection to the symbols of places, rather than the physical place itself (Nanzer, 2004). College campuses often provide a means by which people connect to a specific community. Southeastern Community College, with campuses in West Burlington and Keokuk, Iowa, and centers in Mount Pleasant and Fort Madison, Iowa, can be interpreted as a symbol of the region of Southeast Iowa. Southeastern Community College helps to geographically define the territorial limits of Southeast Iowa, but it also can symbolize what makes Southeast Iowa unique to its residents and to those who live outside of the region.

Nanzer (2004) stated, “Place identity – life experiences shaped by specific circumstances and personal interpretations – is the single most proximate contributor to sense of place” (p. 366). Places are the result of the way people interpret and respond to the physical and symbolic environment around them (Larsen & Johnson, 2011). The

interpretations that people develop of the physical environment around them depends on the mental and cognitive images that they create (Knox & Marston, 2011). Interpretations of places are constructed in the brain and are based on background knowledge, experience, perception, and emotion (Knox & Marston). This idea further builds on the suggestion that “places are socially constructed” (Knox & Marston).

Kirkwood, McKinlay, and McVittie (2013) defined “place identity” as “...a potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of settings” (p. 454). The concept of place identity continues to support the notion that places are socially constructed (Knox & Marston, 2011). Smith (2002) quoted Richard Muir, stating that: “Often the significance of place and the meanings associated with that place lie at the core of a person’s identity” [yet] “...much concerning the relationship between people and places remains poorly understood” (p. 435).

Place attachment

Previous research has documented that one of the fundamental aspects of human nature is the tendency to develop strong emotional attachment to a place (Smith & Cartlidge, 2011; Relph, 1976). People become attached to places because they help fulfill basic human needs (Relph, 1976; Smith & Cartlidge, 2011; Tuan, 1974). The place most people develop their strongest affinity for is called “home” because it holds the deepest personal, emotional ties. Home can be either a place of refuge or filled with particularly moving experiences (Smith & Cartlidge, 2011; Relph, 1976). For college students, a dorm room or an apartment is a place that creates a sense of attachment for the individual because of the meaning of the place in the student’s life as a student.

Central to any study of place attachment is a focus on the qualities and characteristics of that particular place. Geographers have made some significant contributions in this area of research. Marsh (1987) provided a classic example when he explained that, despite endemic poverty and economic collapse, residents in the anthracite mining towns of northeastern Pennsylvania refused to leave their home communities because of their unconditional bonds with the place and sense of rootedness (Marsh, 1987; Smith & Cartlidge, 2011). Marsh's work produced insight into the idea that "...people's attachment to place is a result of the complex interplay between the historical means (economic activity) and the ongoing meaning (cultural, emotional significance) of a place" (Smith & Cartlidge, 2011, p. 541).

Place attachment research has become more sophisticated as scholars seek to uncover the characteristics of a place and the subtleties of people's bonding with a location (Smith & Cartlidge, 2011). For instance, Schnell (2003) produced connections between heritage tourism, ethnic identity, and place attachment among residents in Lindsborg, Kansas (Schnell, 2003; Smith & Cartlidge, 2011). Schnell found the repackaging of the town's ethnic identity not only helped preserve the local Swedish heritage but also fostered deep-seated feelings of attachment among members of the community (Smith & Cartlidge, 2011). In addition, Brown and Raymond (2007) used Australia's Great Otway National Park to examine the complex relationship between the physical landscape and people's attachment to place (Brown & Raymond, 2007; Smith & Cartlidge, 2011). This study demonstrated that aesthetic, economic, recreational, spiritual, and therapeutic activities are important in explaining why people bond with a place (Brown & Raymond, 2007; Smith & Cartlidge, 2011).

Summary

This chapter has provided an examination of literature as it relates to rural communities, rural community colleges, sense of place, and quality of life. Rural communities are uniquely different from urban communities. There is a void in the literature related to understanding the role of the community college in contributing to quality of life in a rural community. This has led me to ask the following research questions:

1. How do community leaders define *rural* and *rural community*?
2. How do community leaders define *quality of life*?
3. What do community leaders perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the small, rural community college?
4. What is the role of the small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life in a rural community?

The next chapter describes the methodology used to conduct this research.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

In order to build an understanding and to explore the phenomenon of quality of life, this study utilized a case study methodology. The process involved studying a case in an everyday, current setting (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2016). The case study methodology was appropriate because the purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of quality of life using data from individuals who either lived in the community, worked in the community, or both, and because of their role or position in the community, had been identified as community leaders in a rural community. The community college serves a specific region of four counties. The selection of the case study is based on the uniqueness of the demographics within the district's geographic boundaries (population and county borders).

This study was designed using a qualitative approach because qualitative research is "...concerned with elucidating human environments and human experiences within a variety of conceptual frameworks" (Winchester & Rofe, 2005, p. 5, as cited in Hay 2016). Rossman and Rollis (2012) suggested two unique features exist in qualitative research: (1) "the researcher is the means through which the study is conducted" and (2) "the purpose is to learn about some facet of the social world" (p. 5). Qualitative researchers seek answers to their questions using a real-world setting (Creswell, 2013; Rossman & Rollis, 2012; Yin, 2016). When conducting a case study, the researcher identifies some element of society for which the researcher seeks to develop and acquire a deeper level of understanding and awareness. The result of a more in-depth awareness of a phenomenon is to "...learn about

some aspect of the social world and to generate new understandings that can be used” (Rossman & Rollis, 2012, p. 4).

Yin (2016) suggested that there are five features that are unique to qualitative research studies. These features are used to tell the difference between qualitative research and other forms of social science research. The first feature of qualitative research is that the focus of qualitative research is “...studying the meaning of people’s lives, in their real-world roles” (p. 9). Social interactions will occur with minimal intrusion. In qualitative research, people will be saying what they want to say and are not limited to giving responses to the researcher’s survey questions.

The second feature of qualitative research that Yin (2016) identified is the priority given to representing the views and perspectives of the study participants. Capturing the perspectives of study participants is an important part of qualitative inquiry. The events and ideas emerging from qualitative research can represent the meanings given to real-world events by the people who experience them, not the values, preconceptions, or meanings held by researchers.

The third feature of qualitative research identified by Yin (2016) is that qualitative research “...explicitly embraces the contextual conditions within which people’s lives take place” (p. 9). In other words, the context in which people live their daily lives is crucial to qualitative inquiry. The “social, institutional, cultural and environmental conditions” (p. 9) may influence how people live their lives and how they respond to the world around them. Qualitative researchers do not bring participants into a laboratory or experimental setting in order to collect data (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative researchers seek to collect data from

participants in the natural environment of their lives. The data collected are often collected in the participant's everyday setting (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2016).

Fourth, according to Yin (2016), qualitative research is "...driven by a desire to explain social behavior and thinking, through existing or emerging concepts" (p. 10). The concepts explored might contribute to a deeper understanding of a social process, for example (Yin). Qualitative research, however, is not a regurgitation of a participant's daily life because qualitative research must contain interpretation on some level. Finally, the fifth feature of qualitative research that Yin identified is that qualitative research "acknowledges the value of collecting, integrating, and presenting data from a variety of sources of evidence as part of any given study" (p. 11). The sources of data, collected from interviews and field observations, along with data collected from document review, lends to the richness of the description of the phenomenon by the researcher in a qualitative inquiry.

Qualitative research focuses on the lived or felt experience (Merten, 2017). Using a qualitative approach to this study enabled me to explore the phenomenon of quality of life from the perspective of the participants in this study using their lived experiences.

Qualitative inquiry seeks to make meaning of and understand how individuals make sense of their world and the experiences they have (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2016).

Epistemology: Phenomenology

The framework for this study was based on an epistemological philosophical assumption that seeks to understand the essence of lived experience (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) stated that phenomenology "...aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p. 115). Phenomenological approaches to qualitative inquiry focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform

experience into consciousness (Patton). Utilizing a phenomenological approach in this study allowed me to explore the phenomenon, quality of life, and to try to capture the essence of what is meant by quality of life using the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants in this study.

Research Design

In order to gain a deeper understanding surrounding the phenomenon of quality of life in a rural community, I collected and analyzed qualitative data from community leaders from the communities in the four-county area that is served by Southeastern Community College. This study was conducted as a single case study. This type of research is an empirical (or observation) inquiry that investigates a real-life phenomenon within its everyday context (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2016).

Context

Southeast Iowa is a region located in the far southeastern corner of the state of Iowa. The service area of the community college district includes four counties but only the southern half of the northern-most county, three of which border the Mississippi River. When combined together, the population of the four counties reaches almost 107,000 residents total.

Des Moines County

Des Moines County is a county in Southeast Iowa with a land area of 416.12 square miles (Census Bureau, 2019). It is the most populous county in the Southeast Iowa region and has a population density of 96.9 people per square mile. This is the highest population density of the Southeast Iowa region. According to the Census Bureau (2019), the July 1, 2017 population estimate of Des Moines County was 39,417. The percentage of the

population that is identified as Caucasian is 90% (Census Bureau, 2019). Ninety-two percent of people age 25 or over have graduated from high school and 19.6% of people age 25 or over have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The median household income, in 2017 dollars, is \$47,524 and per capita income is \$27,168. Of the population of Des Moines County, in 2015, 20,084 people were employed by one of 1,102 employers. Burlington is the county seat and largest city, with a 2017 estimated population of 25,022 (Census Bureau, 2019).

Burlington, Iowa

Located on the banks of the Mississippi River, Burlington can be described as the principal city in the greater Burlington area, including cities of Burlington and West Burlington, Iowa. A majority of government offices for Des Moines County are located in Burlington, and it serves as the commercial and economic base of the area. Downtown Burlington is located on the Mississippi River where U.S. Highway 34 crosses the Mississippi River between Iowa and Illinois.

From Interstate 74 at Galesburg, Illinois, U.S. Highway 34 travels west to Monmouth, Illinois, and then continues on westward to Burlington and travels westward to Mount Pleasant, Iowa, another one of the three sites for data collection in this study. Burlington is a junction for U.S. Highway 34 and U.S. Highway 61, which travels north and south throughout the Southeast Iowa region, providing residents a travel route from Keokuk, Iowa, to the Quad Cities metropolitan area (Davenport, Iowa; Bettendorf, Iowa; Moline, Illinois; Rock Island, Illinois) approximately 2.5 hours to the north. Burlington is an important travel junction because of the two U.S. highways that connect this city to other parts of the state

and country. The greater Burlington area is home to Great River Medical Center which can be described as the primary health care center for the Southeast Iowa region.

Lee County

Lee County is a county in Southeast Iowa with a land area of 517.52 square miles (Census Bureau, 2019). According to the Census Bureau (2019), the July 1, 2017, population estimate of Lee County was 34,295. It is the second most populous county in the Southeast Iowa region and has a population density of 69.3 people per square mile. The percentage of the population that is identified as Caucasian is 93.9% (Census Bureau, 2019). Over 92% of people age 25 or over have graduated from high school and 14.6% of people age 25 or over have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The median household income, in 2017 dollars, was \$48,266, and per capita income was \$24,408. Among the population of Lee County in 2015, 15,119 people were employed by one of 895 employers. The city of Keokuk had a 2017 estimated population of 10,343 (Census Bureau, 2019).

Keokuk, Iowa

The city of Keokuk is in southern Lee County, bordering Hancock County, Illinois, across the Mississippi River to the east and Clark County, Missouri, to the south. Keokuk has a strong labor union presence with a considerable manufacturing sector. However, this area remains economically depressed from the late 1960s and early 1970s when many local industries started merging with larger companies. With these mergers, companies began to lose the personal relationships that are likely to exist in smaller, locally-owned plants.

The city of Keokuk runs north and south, and the main transportation route into town is US Highway 61. Entering from the north, the Main Street business district is expansive, stretching from 1st Street at the foot of the bridge over the Mississippi River to 14th St. A

visitor will see a variety of activity downtown, ranging from active businesses to vacant storefronts, along with empty lots where buildings have been demolished.

Henry County

Henry County is a county in Southeast Iowa with a land area of 434.33 square miles (Census Bureau, 2019). According to the Census Bureau (2019), the July 1, 2017 population estimate of Henry County was 19,863. It is the third most populous county in the Southeast Iowa region and has a population density of 46.4 people per square mile. The percentage of the population that is identified as Caucasian, or white alone, is 92.7% (Census Bureau, 2019). In Henry County, 92% of people age 25 or over have graduated from high school and 19.9% of people age 25 or over have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The median household income, in 2017 dollars, was \$52,275 and per capita income was \$26,340. Of the population of Henry County in 2015, 8,258 people were employed by one of 519 employers. The city of Mount Pleasant is the county seat and largest city in the county with a 2017 estimated population of 8,497 (Census Bureau, 2019).

Mount Pleasant, Iowa

The community of Mount Pleasant is located at the junction of US Highway 34 and US Highway 218. Highway 34 travels east and west, and Highway 218 travels north and south. The town also features a railroad line through which trains travel regularly. Mount Pleasant is surrounded by agricultural fields used for crop production.

Mount Pleasant is the county seat of Henry County and features the country courthouse, sheriff's office and jail, and the Henry County Health Center, a rural hospital facility providing medical care to the Henry County region. In addition, Mount Pleasant is

home to Iowa Wesleyan University, a small private institution with a rich history in the Mount Pleasant community.

Louisa County

Louisa County is a county in Southeast Iowa with a land area of 401.77 square miles (Census Bureau, 2019). According to the Census Bureau (2019), the July 1, 2017, population estimate of Louisa County was 11,184. It is the least populous county in the Southeast Iowa region and has a population density of 28.3 people per square mile. The percentage of the population that is identified as Caucasian, or white alone, is 93.3% (Census Bureau, 2019). In Louisa County, 81.5% of people age 25 or over have graduated from high school and 14.9% of people age 25 or over have earned a bachelor's degree or higher. The median household income, in 2017 dollars, is \$54,393, and per capita income is \$27,234. Of the population of Louisa County in 2015, 2,787 people were employed by one of 214 employers. The city of Wapello is the county seat and largest city in the county with a 2017 estimated population of 2,023 (Census Bureau, 2019).

Southeastern Community College

Southeastern Community College is classified as a public, two-year, small community college (Carnegie Classification website, 2017). The college, as it is known today, began as two separate community colleges. When the state merged community college service areas, region 16 was the result of the merger of Burlington Junior College, the state's oldest community college established in 1920, and Keokuk Community College, the last community college established in 1953 (Friedel, Salinas, Jr., & Thornton, 2015). The institutions became known as Southeastern Community College in 1966 with the passage of Senate File 550 (Friedel et al., 2015). Both institutions were operated by local community

school districts until July 1, 1967, at which time they became the North Campus (in West Burlington) and South Campus (in Keokuk) of Southeastern Community College (Southeastern Community College, 2018).

The state of Iowa is divided into 15 regions served by community colleges in each region. In southeast Iowa, the region is served by one community college that has two campuses, one regional center, and a downtown Burlington site. The north campus is the main campus site and the college's administrative center; it is located in West Burlington, Iowa, Des Moines County, approximately forty-five miles north of the southern campus. The South campus is located in Keokuk, Iowa, Lee County, the most southern county of the four.

The regional center is located in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, Henry County, approximately 30 miles west of the main campus. The downtown Burlington site is the location of the Center for Business and Industry Services, which provides continuing education and non-credit programming to businesses and residents in the region.

Data Collection

Population sample

The primary sampling strategy selected for use in this study was a purposeful sampling strategy known as key informant sampling (Patton, 2015). This sampling strategy is also known as key knowledgeable or reputational sampling (Patton, 2015). Key informant sampling was selected for use in this study because the goal of data collection in this study was to collect data from individuals in the community who, based on their role or position, were identified to have a knowledge and/or awareness of the community that perhaps was unique to them based on that role or position. These individuals were selected as key informants in order to explore the phenomenon of quality of life and how this phenomenon

exists in a rural community from their perception. According to Patton (2015), the purpose or explanation behind reputational sampling is to “identify people with great knowledge and/or influence (by reputation) who can shed light on the inquiry issues” (p. 268).

In order to identify and recruit participants, I had to rely on the relationships of people in two out of the three communities. In Keokuk, I contacted the director of the Keokuk Chamber of Commerce for assistance in identifying and recruiting participants who met the criteria for participating in the sample for this study. In Burlington, I relied on my own personal connections to identify and recruit participants. I had previously worked in a professional capacity in the Burlington area; therefore, I contacted a couple of individuals who I had stayed in contact with after I assumed a new position. In addition, I contacted individuals who met the criteria for participating in this study and provided them with the recruitment email and waited for a response. This same process was used in Mount Pleasant. I am not as well-known in Mount Pleasant as Burlington; therefore, it was more difficult to get participants from this town to agree to participate in this study because they did not have prior background knowledge of my background without the recruitment email that was sent.

Another sampling strategy used in this study was snowball, or chain sampling (Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling is a strategy that involves the researcher collecting data from a few relevant sources (interviewees) at first. Next, the researcher starts asking those sources for additional people that they might know who potentially could be a relevant source of additional data (Patton). Snowball sampling was particularly useful in Mount Pleasant because I am not as well-known in Mount Pleasant as I am in Burlington. I relied on the relationships and connections that participants in Mount Pleasant had and asked those who agreed to participate in the study to identify other individuals who might be good to

include in this study who met the criteria for participation. Snowball sampling was also used in Keokuk but not in Burlington because I was able to identify and recruit enough participants there without using snowball sampling.

According to Patton (2015), homogenous sampling is a typical sampling strategy used in focus group interviews. The purpose of homogenous sampling is to explore a particular subgroup more in depth (Patton). The subgroup being explored in this study is key informants, individuals identified as community leaders using the definition in Chapter 1. Commonly used factors, such as gender, specific position in the community, marital status, or education level, were not used to define the homogeneity of each group of participants. Instead, the role of key informant based on community leadership position or role was used as the factor deciding homogeneity for each group.

Methods

In this study, data collection occurred using the method of focus group interviews. A focus group is a special type of group, with a unique purpose, size, and composition (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The focus group interview is designed to collect opinions and enables the researcher to develop a better understanding of how people feel or think about an issue, idea, product or service (Krueger & Casey). This study sought to gather data from individuals identified as key informants who have a position or role in the community that could be described as a leadership role. These individuals were identified as having a leadership role and, as a result of this role, were likely to have an awareness of the community college in the community.

Focus group research involves careful planning involving discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment

(Kreuger & Casey, 2015). The ideal number of participants in a focus group is between 5-10 people led by an interviewer or moderator (Krueger & Casey). The discussions are intended to be relaxed and informal (Krueger & Casey).

In a previous study, Ryan, Gandha, Culbertson, and Carlson (2014) stated that “...making focus group design choices explicitly in relation to the type of evidence required would enhance the empirical value and rigor associated with focus group utilization” (p. 329). The researchers argued that particular choices in design, such as role of participant interaction, focus group structure and role of the moderator, are different depending on the type of evidence to be generated. Using Ryan et al. (2014) for guidance, the focus group interviews in this study were conducted in a semi-structured format. A pre-determined interview protocol was used. The researcher took a neutral position, as moderator, so as to not potentially lead participant responses through probing or follow-up questions. The researcher asked questions listed on the interview protocol. Participants, however, did sometimes ask probing questions to each other. The researcher maintained a neutral position because of the type of data being gathered using this focus group technique. The data collected were the perceptions of the participants in each focus group. The neutral position of the researcher was important so that participants were not influenced to respond a certain way based on a follow-up, or probing, question asked by the researcher.

Ryan et al. (2014) identified two types of focus group design perspectives: Type A, or Individualistic Social Psychology Perspective; and Type B, or Social Constructionist Perspective. The Type A design perspective indicated that the focus group interview was designed with “...a scientific orientation where the researcher uses his or her research skills to control bias, extract relevant information and discard irrelevant information” (p. 331). The

Type B design perspective focus groups indicated that the structure of participant interaction in the focus group was free-flowing, enabling participants to share observations and experiences. In Type B focus groups, the role of the researcher is "...inhibited or subordinated through the use of loosely structured protocols with a few open-ended questions" (p. 331). By taking a neutral stance conducting the focus group interview, this allows the researcher to allow the participants themselves to "take over" the focus group interview direction (p. 331). This is exactly what the researcher tried to do in this study in conducting the focus group interviews. Since participants were being asked questions about their perceptions, it was important for the researcher to allow participants to keep the conversation moving naturally during each focus group.

Six focus group interviews were conducted in this study. The interview protocol is listed in the Appendices. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted by Iowa State University (see Appendix A). Two separate interviews were conducted at each of the three sites: Keokuk, Iowa; Burlington, Iowa; and Mount Pleasant, Iowa. The sites selected for this study were selected because the community college has a campus or center there.

Sample participants were selected based on the following: (1) being 18 years of age or older; (2) key informant status as a result of being a resident of or a professional position held in the community which contributed to the participant being identified as a community leader; and (3) having some awareness of the community college in the community. Each focus group interview was approximately one hour in length. The researcher led each interview with a discussion of questions related to individual perceptions of the role of the small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life. The focus group interview protocol is shown in Appendix D.

In setting up data collection, the goal was to select 6-8 individuals to participate in each focus group interview. The location, and number of participants in each focus group are provided in Tables 1, 2, and 3. All six focus group interviews were held in a private room at the local public library in each community. A room was reserved that was large enough to accommodate the number of participants involved in the focus group interviews. The researcher prepared the room by arranging two tables right next to each other to create a larger square. Chairs were arranged around the tables so that two people sat next to each other on each side. The researcher had a separate table situated along the wall located behind the group at the larger table.

Table 1. Demographics of the participants in Keokuk, IA

Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #1, Keokuk, IA			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Carol	Female	Administrative Assistant	45 years
Melanie	Female	Business owner	44 years
Thomas	Male	Elected official	55 years
Martha	Female	Community organization director	24 years
Jameson	Male	Business owner	49 years
Alicia	Female	Municipal department head	20 years
Lynn	Female	Retired educator	34 years
Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #2, Keokuk, IA			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Amanda	Female	Social Worker	14 years
Tim	Male	Business Owner	20 years
Aaron	Male	Retired counselor	28 years
Marcia	Female	Job Counselor	29 years
Meredith	Female	Banker	16 years
Todd	Male	Municipal department head	27 years
Vivian	Female	Community organization director	30 years

Table 2. Demographics of the participants in Burlington, IA

Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #3, Burlington, IA			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Kevin	Male	Municipal department head	12 years
Clyde	Male	Municipal department head	40 years
Brian	Male	Business owner	25 years
Jack	Male	Retired police officer	43 years
Steven	Male	Firefighter	50 years
Kathy	Female	Education administrator	46 years
Edward	Male	Municipal department head	55 years
Tammy	Female	Nurse	31 years

Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #4, Burlington, IA			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Dale	Male	Elected official	51 years
Darren	Male	Municipal department head	12 years
Clark	Male	Businessman	36 years
Ben	Male	Community development official	14.5 years
Richard	Male	Education administrator	8 years
Betty	Female	Retired job counselor	61 years

Table 3. Demographics of the participants in Mount Pleasant, IA

Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #5, Mount Pleasant, IA			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Joanna	Female	Education administrator	4.5 years
Barbara	Female	Nonprofit director	15 years
Denise	Female	Workforce Development	44 years
Jennifer	Female	Economic development	34 years
Marlene	Female	State government employee	45 years

Participant characteristics of Focus Group Interview #6, Mount Pleasant, IA			
<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Role in the Community</i>	<i>Length of time in community</i>
Robert	Male	Municipal department head	30 years
Kay	Female	Educator	30 years
Anne	Female	Educator	35 years
Lisa	Female	Community development official	8 years
James	Male	Education administrator	22 years
Shawn	Male	Healthcare administrator	23 years

This separate table contained refreshments (bottles of water, tea, cookies, napkins and plates) for participants to snack on. There were also pieces of candy scattered in the middle of the larger table arrangement for participants to eat if they chose to. Each participant was given a pen and 1-2 sheets of blank paper to use for whatever purpose they wanted to (scratch paper, take notes, doodle, etc.).

I introduced myself and gave a brief opening statement about who I was, and the purpose of the focus group interview. I described the format of the focus group interview to the participants and each participant gave informed consent to participate and be audio recorded. I then proceeded to begin the focus group interviews.

Data Analysis

In this study, the goal of data analysis was to make a connection between the data collected and the research questions that guided this study. Yin (2016, p. 185) suggested that qualitative data analysis occurs through a series of five phases: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding.

The first phase of qualitative analysis is compiling data (Yin, 2016). This is the process by which the researcher organizes field notes from observations and data collection. Data analysis begins with the researcher formally preparing and organizing notes and data (Yin). The second phase of data analysis is disassembling the data or breaking it down into smaller pieces (Yin). Disassembling the data is the process by which the researcher takes the formally organized data and breaks it up into fragments for analysis. The third phase of data analysis is where the data is reassembled in order to begin making sense of it all (Yin).

Qualitative researchers often engross themselves in the data by reading transcripts more than once, often several times (Creswell, 2013). Due to qualitative data analysis

relying on researcher interpretation of the data (phase four of data analysis) (Yin, 2016), it is crucial that the researcher be familiar with the data. In the fourth phase of data analysis, the researcher will use reassembled data from phase three to create a narrative that will be accompanied by tables, graphs, and charts to present the data (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2016). Phase four involves describing, classifying, and interpreting the data by forming codes, categories, and themes (Yin, 2016). Finally, the fifth phase is the concluding phase where the researcher “raises the level of discussion of the findings to a higher level” (Yin, 2016).

Data analysis in this qualitative study occurred using two analytic strategies: note-taking and coding. The first analytic strategy used in data analysis was the analysis of field notes taken during each of the focus group interviews. Taking notes was crucial because note-taking was a method of documenting, or gathering, data observed during the focus group interviews.

The second analytic strategy used in this study was identifying codes and reducing codes to themes. The data collected in this study were coded using two cycles of coding (Saldana, 2013). The purpose of first cycle coding is to initially summarize segments of data (Saldana, 2015). Codes were determined by the researcher according to the words and phrases used by participants to answer questions during the focus group interviews.

The first cycle coding method used in this study was descriptive coding (Saldana). Descriptive coding is defined as:

...assigning labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data. Provides an inventory of topics for indexing and categorizing. Appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data, ethnographies, and studies with a wide variety of data forms. (Saldana, 2013, p. 262)

The second cycle coding method used in this study was Pattern Coding (Saldana, 2015). Pattern Coding is a way of grouping summaries of data from first cycle coding into smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts (Saldana, 2015). Pattern Codes are “explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation” (p. 236). As regularities were identified, they were documented as a theme in the transcripts. Miles and Huberman (2014, pp. 86-93, as cited in Saldana, 2015, p. 236), suggested six reasons for which Pattern Coding is appropriate: (1) condensing large amounts of data into a smaller number of analytic units; (2) development of major themes from the data; (3) the search for rules, causes, and explanations in the data; (4) examining social networks and patterns of human relationships; (5) forming theoretical constructs and processes; and (6) laying the groundwork for cross-case analysis by generating common themes and directional processes.

Six focus group interview transcripts were coded using Descriptive Coding and Pattern Coding (Saldana, 2015). Descriptive coding created a summary of data content from the transcripts and allowed the researcher to organize the data content at the beginning of data analysis. Data coded with specific codes were extracted from the main body of the transcript and reassembled in a separate file identified by the descriptive codes. This enabled the researcher to take a closer look at the words and phrases used by participants and helped organize the data for further analysis. After the audio recordings were transcribed, I coded each transcript by hand, choosing to perform coding this way rather than by using qualitative data analysis software.

Data analysis started with the focus group audio recordings being transcribed. A transcript of each audio recording was used to start the data analysis process. Each transcript

was coded manually instead of using data analysis software. Lichtman (2006) recommends developing a broad list of codes. I used descriptive coding to develop a list of initial codes that summarized passages. The initial codes were compiled into a document that I used to start identifying patterns and narrowing down the codes. Pattern coding was used to narrow down the broad list of initial codes. During this process, the large number of first-cycle codes was collapsed into a smaller number of codes. The transcripts were reanalyzed using the pattern codes and this led to the development of themes. Based on Creswell (2013), “the themes are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (p. 186).

Trustworthiness

Research studies need to consider any ethical issues that might arise during the research process. In this study, an informed consent document was prepared and presented to each focus group participant. The researcher explained what the document was, the purpose it served, and why it was necessary. Each participant was given two copies of the informed consent document, one copy to be signed and returned to the researcher and the other for the participant to retain for personal records. The informed consent document and interview protocol are provided in the Appendices.

Another ethical consideration is credibility. To help establish and ensure credibility in this study, three separate practices were used. First, triangulation occurred through the use of multiple data sources (six different focus group interviews), and multiple sites, in the form of three separate communities with geographic separation. The second practice used to ensure credibility in this study was member checking. Member checking is the process by which the data is reviewed by the participants themselves to make sure that the data are

accurate (Yin, 2016). Member checking is a step that helps establish trustworthiness. The third practice used to ensure credibility in this study was peer review. This occurred with the researcher having a colleague examine the study and to identify and address questions regarding the methods (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2016).

I worked to remain neutral and avoid any appearance of impropriety throughout this study. First, when conducting the focus group interviews, I asked only the questions that were listed on the interview protocol. During the interviews, I had opportunities to ask more probing questions based on individual responses, but I chose not to. To do so might have prevented a differing opinion. It might have cut off the open flow of discussion. I made this decision based on my desire to remain neutral and unbiased due to my positionality.

After each focus group interview, the audio recordings were uploaded from a personal recording device to a secure cloud storage site through Iowa State University. Then the audio recordings were deleted from the recording device. The audio recordings were then uploaded to a transcription site. Once upload was confirmed to the transcription site, the audio recordings were deleted from the cloud storage site. The audio recordings of each focus group interview were transcribed, and a transcript of each interview was produced.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. The purpose of this study was to explore the concept of the small rural community college in contributing to quality of life in a small rural community using the perspectives of local key informants. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do community leaders define *rural* and *rural community*?
2. How do community leaders define *quality of life*?
3. What do community leaders perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the small, rural community college?
4. What is the role of the small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life in a rural community?

A total of 39 key informants were interviewed using six focus groups. Interviews were one hour in length. Participants were each assigned a pseudonym to conceal their identities.

The data analysis process included writing a reflection following each focus group interview, listening to the recorded interviews, and reading and coding the transcripts. Data analysis was concurrent with the collection of data. Next, the transcripts were coded which occurred using two cycles (Saldana, 2013). The first cycle of coding grouped the data and assigned codes using descriptive codes. Descriptive coding is the process of using short phrases or singular words to describe the response data (Saldana, 2013).

The second cycle of coding utilized pattern coding. Pattern coding is a way of grouping summaries of data from first cycle coding into smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts (Saldana, 2013). Pattern codes are “explanatory or inferential codes,

ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation” (Saldana, 2013, p. 236).

As regularities were identified, they were documented as a theme in the transcripts.

Thematic Findings

The following section discussed the findings of the study. The data collected from the six focus group interviews produced six main themes and eighteen subthemes (Figure 4). Each theme is supported and compared with the literature relevant to the topic areas of rural communities, community colleges, and quality of life.

Theme 1: Rural means different things to people

Subtheme 1a: Location and agriculture

Subtheme 1b: Resources

Subtheme 1c: Rural challenges

Theme 2: Rural sense of community

Subtheme 2a: Personal connections and relationships

Subtheme 2b: Trust

Theme 3: Quality of life is broadly defined

Subtheme 3a: Individual experience

Subtheme 3b: Fulfillment of needs

Subtheme 3c: Safety

Subtheme 3d: Opportunity

Theme 4: Quality of life in Southeast Iowa

Subtheme 4a: Friendliness

Subtheme 4b: Natural environment

Subtheme 4c: Accessibility

Theme 5: Community colleges possess various strengths and weaknesses

Subtheme 5a: Strength: Affordability

Subtheme 5b: Strength: Opportunities

Subtheme 5c: Weakness: Negative perceptions

Theme 6: Contribution of community college to quality of life is broad

Subtheme 6a: Access and opportunity

Subtheme 6b: Economic impact and workforce development

Subtheme 6c: Partnerships

Figure 4. Themes generated from the focus group interviews

Theme 1: Rural means different things to people

The term rural has been around for some time. Scholars and demographers have developed definitions for the concept of rural. The government has a definition of rural for the purposes of explaining data collected through the census every ten years. Rural is a word that is simply a part of everyday language. For the purposes of this study, the definition of rural has been operationalized as any community up to a population of 25,000.

The ways in which individuals identify what it means to be rural is unique to each person. To further explore how the concept of rural takes on individual meaning, the research will present findings that emerged from the data and categorize these findings in three subthemes: *location*, *resources* and *rural challenges*.

The first subtheme, *location*, emerged from discussions in each of the focus groups. Most participants mentioned location in their responses when asked how they would define rural. The second subtheme, *resources*, and the third subtheme, *rural challenges*, emerged from the discussions as well. Participants mentioned specific challenges related to rural communities as they were discussing how they would define rural communities.

Subtheme 1a: Location and agriculture

Location and agriculture were common perceptions when it came to identifying or defining what it meant to be rural. Participants were definitive in making a distinction between what was rural versus what was not. Many participants noted that rural referred to a location or place outside of a community, and described a sense of place, in an area that was away from a community. In this study, sense of place was defined using Hay (1988) to operationalize the concept of sense of place. Based on Hay (1988), sense of place was defined as a personal connection with place that is made up of three elements: perception,

emotions, and experiences with a place. In discussing location as a way in which they defined rural, it is important to note that participants referenced place as a crucial component. From this discussion, rural can be defined as place-based, making a specific place, and its qualities and characteristics, important to how people perceive and define rural and rural community

Clyde was the first to comment on how to define rural with a connection to agriculture by stating, *“I would say location...where a great deal of the economy revolves around agricultural things as far as crop production.”* Another participant, Richard, remarked by stating, *“I think rural is more defined when farming is the main industry or livelihood of the community.”* Clark noted his observation by stating, *“I would agree with [Richard]. When I think of rural, I think of where farming is the driver, that local economy.”*

The question of how to define rural was dominated by perceptions that rural means farming and agriculture. James also referenced agriculture in stating, *“When you say rural, I immediately think agriculture and agriculture base.”* Shawn shared his observation that was similar to James. Shawn stated, *“Anything that is intensely related to agriculture.”* Betty also stated about location and a potential sense of place: *When I think of rural, I think of usually less services, less availability to opportunities.* Another speaker, Joanna, remarked, *“I think about a setting. A rural setting to me is a community that is based in an environment that has the agriculture support that is primary.”*

Participants continued to offer definitions of what it means to be rural that were based on the physical environment around them in the communities in which they lived. The setting of a place was important to how participants perceived rural in their experience. Tammy stated, *“I would think that anywhere outside of the city limits is rural.”* Marlene

described rural with a specific reference to a sense of the place being defined, by commenting, *“Rural to me means out in the country. It doesn’t mean a Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. Yeah, we are a rural community for a small town, but rural to me means within 5-10 miles of a town.”* Jennifer remarked further about defining rural and how it reflects a specific place, *“I would probably agree with that. More of a farm, country – where Mt. Pleasant is a small town, Cedar Rapids is a city.”*

Other participants recognized population size and observed the size of the number of residents living in a community as a way of defining rural or not. Brian offered his observation by stating, *“I would consider Mt. Pleasant rural. Maybe 15,000 and under. I don’t know. I mean it’s a different perspective depending on who you’re asking.”* Other participants were not as focused on location in offering a definition of rural. Lisa commented, *“We use demographic numbers to help us gauge, so typically any community or communities that serves a group of people under the population of 50,000 tends to be what we deem rural. So that can be either incorporated or non-incorporated.”* Darren concurred: *I think towns of 10,000 in the middle of Iowa are still rural. I think anything under the population of 50,000 in the agriculture state would be rural.* Another participant, Denise stated, *“I think about not urban. If I am driving from Mt. Pleasant to Burlington, both towns, but very much both open on the road. There is not a lot of traffic. So that is rural to me.”* Anne also remarked, *“I think rural to me would be that you can get about anywhere you need to go in less than a half an hour.”*

Subtheme 1b: Resources

The second subtheme to emerge from the data under theme 1 was the subtheme of resources. Participants discussed resources and amenities in their responses to the question

of how they define what it means to be rural. Participants noted a lack of resources or amenities or the ability to access resources in a rural community.

Kathy stated, *“I think I would put it down to resources. You can’t easily access a lot of resources.”* Kevin concurred by remarking, *“I would consider a community that probably lacks some of the amenities that are easily accessible for most people maybe like a grocery store.* Other participants were more specific about the resources available in a rural community, using access to resources as a way of differentiating between what defines a city versus a rural community. Steve remarked, *“City services such as running water and sewer, those kinds of things versus having a septic tank and a well.* Robert commented that his definition of rural involves having to travel as well. He stated, *“In my mind, rural gives me immediate thought that I may not have all the amenities at my current 5-minute door step. I might have to travel to find that.”* In addition, Kay stated, *“You are always going to have to commute to get to whatever you need.”*

Subtheme 1c: Rural challenges

The third subtheme to emerge from the data under theme one was rural challenges. Several participants discussed challenges that they felt were specific to the rural community. These challenges varied in type and included things such as industries, employment, and public transportation. Lynn commented, *“I would say a lot of our challenges are industries leaving and employment.”* Marcia also observed:

We’ve lost a lot of manufacturing jobs. That’s affected us. When I travel around the area, a lot of the times what I will hear from other organizations is that fact that Southeast Iowa has the best workers. They have good values, we have hard workers, they’re known at Southeast Iowa. What I see right now with the dislocated worker population is they’ve got a lot of talent, but there’s nothing here. And so, they’re struggling, and I see a lot of them really struggling, and it really scares me.

Carol noted, “*Public transportation.*” She went on to explain, “*I would say that particularly on the ... when you're talking about a community college in a low economic area that we're in, a lot of people don't have reliable transportation and they don't have access to it.*”

In addition to industries leaving, lack of employment, and lack of public transportation, another participant identified housing and workforce. Alicia commented, “*I would say the two biggest things that I would ... identify is housing and work force, which bleeds into education, work force readiness.*” When prompted, by another participant, for further explanation of what was meant by housing and workforce, Alicia explained further by stating, “*General dilapidation ... and just the general appeal when somebody drives through [town]. We don't have an area of town that's bad. It's generally sparse about ... in each block, there's one house that doesn't look good.*”

With respect to housing being a challenge in a rural community, Martha mentioned, “*And I would add to that, just safe and affordable housing that meets low and moderate incomes, enough options in those areas that are safe and affordable together.*”

Participants also discussed education and workforce development shortages as specific challenges identified in the rural community. With respect to these challenges, Melanie observed the impact of aging on workforce needs, particularly the need for expanded programs to meet the demand of local industry in the healthcare field:

This year is an example. We probably hired two or three LPNs each month and we're not replacing other LPNs. We're adding to our work force that much every month, and we could double that or triple that if the work force was here for us to hire because population is aging at a rate that we have.

We have to grow our own [workforce] so it is vital for us to have education systems that are current, for them to constantly be looking at how they can

increase their capacity to meet the needs of the people because it's ... I'm afraid we're just at the tip of this iceberg. And I have said since I've been a nurse -- I've been a nurse for 30 years -- I've said the biggest challenge we're ever going to have in health care is human resources. And we are there.

While discussing education in the rural community, another participant commented on the impact of educational experiences to impact a student's career and life choices. Aaron observed, *"I think when you have nearly 70% poverty rate, I think that the field of experience for many students is limited, and unfortunately that impacts their choices on what they feel like they can do.* Expanding on Aaron's remarks regarding educational experiences in a rural community, Amanda observed:

I think that that 70% speaks for a lot as far as a mindset, and families coming from poverty, and it being a cycle.

I think there's a lot of governmental issues that prevent some families to get over that hump, to where maybe they get even a 9, 10 dollar an hour job, and so they get booted off food stamps, but they still aren't making enough to compensate for no longer getting that food assistance.

Another challenge that was discussed as a challenge to rural communities is the issue of geography. The geography of rural communities, proximity to other larger populated areas, puts a strain on rural economic development and rural residents to find adequate employment. Thomas commented:

We're sitting in this Tri-State area and where economic development was very good on the river fronts years ago, when the pollution wasn't as bad, and the regulations weren't as strict as they are now, those industries have obviously gone away. One of our attractions that we had was our power house and the dam because we were able to generate 25 cycle power, which was heavy industry. Power, it was cheap. Hydroelectric and that's why the town basically got on the map. When those industries leave, people are kind of stranded, and, they end up trying to work in areas where they're traveling a lot of miles. And it takes away from your family. It's expensive, and people try to hang on, and it, it affects your family life.

Theme 2: Rural sense of community

The second theme to emerge from the data analysis was the result of how participants responded when asked to define what constitutes a rural community. This question is similar to the first question, defining rural, but the purpose was to explore if there was a difference in how people define rural versus a rural community. The two subthemes that emerged from the data are subtheme 2a, *personal connections and relationships*, and subtheme 2b, *integration and fulfillment of needs*.

Subtheme 2a: Personal connections and relationships

The first subtheme is *personal connections and relationships*. Clyde remarked about how to define a rural community from his perspective, along with a couple of other participants who initially focused on rural-type, or agricultural, things along with physical setting. He stated, “A community with the basis of its economy in rural or agricultural type things. That’s what I would say is a rural community. Another participant, Jack, commented on the inclusion of manufacturing in the community but still being rural with an agricultural component:

I still look at Burlington as kind of being rural even though we have a little bit of manufacturing. You still have the farmers, a common thing to see also so I would really consider Burlington as rural and I suppose a rural community then I would say not a negative thing necessarily but limited services perhaps.

Joanna commented on defining a rural community, talking about a rural community as an experience, discussing space and describing a sense of the place:

I think you have space. You don’t have houses on top of each other. You don’t have cars on top of each other. People own land. They have access to broader kind of experience than just an apartment, grass – its space – it’s spatial. I think there is a beautification...this beauty you just get in a rural setting or rural community that you wouldn’t get in an urban community.

Kay also commented on her observation of what a rural community is, describing a peaceful environment, a sense of place, influenced by agriculture:

I grew up in the middle of the corn fields and that was always kind of a safety zone for me and that is what I envisioned immediately when you say that. It's just kind of peaceful for me in that sense.

Other participants focused their observations on the personal connections.

Participants noted that the rural community is a place where people know each other, take the time to get to know each other, and build relationships. Relationships is a term that was key throughout the responses from participants in all groups. Denise observed, *"I think about friendliness. People that - kind of like you know everyone or if you don't know everyone, you are one or two people away from being connected with pretty much everyone."* Marlene followed up by stating, *"There is a lot more personal connections in a rural community than there would be in urban community. Maybe once or twice removed but you know the family, you know somebody, so you feel like you're part of something."* Other participants, Shawn and Anne, responded more succinctly. When asked how to define a rural community, Shawn commented, *"You know everybody."* Anne narrowed down her definition of how she defines a rural community: *"Relationships."* Darren commented on relationships as part of his definition of rural community by stating, *"I think it has to do with the relationships amongst people. How people are involved and how much they care about the others in the community."*

The first subtheme of *personal connections and relationships* is supported by the sense of community literature (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, 1996). McMillan (1996) suggested that a sense of community can be developed if four components are present: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional

connection. More evidence from the data to support this notion comes from other participants. Barbara commented on her reaction to moving to this area from a larger metropolitan area. She stated, *“I moved here from living in a city all my life. I was expecting everybody to come running about the building to the park or something when the noon whistle went off. That triggers rural community to me.”* Other participants, from a different community, echoed similar comments about how to define a rural community. Kevin commented on community cohesion:

I would consider it a tight-knit, you know all your neighbors and most of the people around you. Maybe even families that have been in that area for a long time. I guess that is how I would look at a rural community. Friday night lights and everybody shows up for the football game.

In addition, Kathy expanded on that with her perspective on self-sufficiency by stating, *“I would consider a rural community a group of people that come together to support their own resources and take care of themselves the best they can.”* Steve also commented on self-sufficiency but from a collective community impact perspective, stating:

A community of about 3,000 or 4,000 people that take care of themselves, help each other out and know all their neighbors, yet have to drive you know 12 or 15 miles to get to a larger community to go to the grocery store.

Lisa commented on her observations about what is a rural community, stating, *“It’s a complete circle and knowing who you go to and so forth. That makes people feel the rural.”*

Subtheme 2b: Trust

The second subtheme of *trust* that emerged from the data is supported by the Sense of Community literature (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and connects to the Community Capitals Framework. Joanna commented, *“When you move here, you feel a little bit like you’re under a microscope but, at the same time, you realize it is very genuine in a rural community.”*

There is just that community sense.” Barbara observed, *“It’s a slower pace. People are not as much in a hurry. They are content to being on the pickup bed truck and just chit chat for a while. It’s not the networking you learn in business.”* Joanna followed up with a similar observation, noting that business relationships in a small town are made when people are out in public, interacting with each other, instead of being inside in an office. Joanna observed, “

Business connections are made out and about. If you’re not out and seeing people in different settings, those connections don’t form. Whether you live in town or live out in the country, I think that rural community is an extension of it all.

Regarding trust, Marlene observed the importance of trust in a rural community from her perspective. She stated, *“I think one other key component is, people in rural communities trust first until they have a reason not to. In urban areas people tend not to trust until it has been earned.”*

Theme 3: Quality of life is broadly defined

The term Quality of Life is used every day in our society. In previous studies, scholars have examined quality of life, attempting to define it and provide additional meaning to this complicated concept (Barcaccia et al., 2013; Brauer & Dymitrow, 2014; Eby, Kitchen, & Williams, 2012; Veenstra et al., 2005; Wakefield & McMullan, 2005). Additional studies have provided evidence to support the notion that defining quality of life as a concept has subjective and objective components (Camfield & Skevington, 2008; Campbell et al., 1976; Diener, 1999; Theofilou, 2013).

The findings presented in this section emerged from the data related to the research question that participants were asked: How do you define quality of life? From the responses in the data, the primary theme of the responses related to quality of life was that

Quality of Life does not have a standardized definition. From this finding, four subthemes emerged from the data. The subthemes are *individual experience, fulfillment of needs, safety, and opportunity.*

Subtheme 3a: Individual experience

The first subtheme, *individual experience*, emerged from the data as participants responded to the question of how to define quality of life. For many participants, defining quality of life depends on what the individual is considering. In other words, the way in which a participant defines quality of life is going to be subjective, based on that individual's experience, needs, and desires. Brian commented on defining quality of life by stating, "*It's pretty arbitrary in a way.*" Jack concurred with his observation, "*It's very subjective actually. What your expectations are to be happy.*" Another participant, Amanda, observed that quality of life has different meanings for different individuals. She commented, "*I think everybody's definition of quality of life is going to be different. For me, I don't think that there is a true definition of quality of life.*"

Todd also acknowledged that defining quality of life takes on a meaning that is specific to a person, talking about differences between basic needs and quality of life:

And the quality of life things go beyond ... Beyond your employment, beyond, you know, your family. Beyond your education. It is what there is that gives you enjoyment out of life. It's the difference between surviving and living, and I think we minimize those things that are what we enjoy and what we strive to... Our passions, which we strive to pursue those things. I can grab a fishing pole and go down to the river and go fishing, that's something that's a little bit enjoyable and take my mind off some of those other things and increase my quality of life a little.

Marcia followed up with this observation on the government pushing an agenda on quality of life as it relates to end of life. She stated, "*I think that sometimes people fall into*

trying to tell somebody, "Well, this is ... This is what quality of life should look like. This is what being successful should look like." But like that's different for everybody. Darren also commented:

Each individual would be different because I know from my hometown of 300 there are people who are perfectly happy and think it's the greatest quality of life ever and you have to drive 20 minutes to do anything but they like that. It's safer and they feel that they can walk around and leave their door unlocked and that's obviously important to them.

Another participant, Kevin, commented with a similar observation, "*It's pretty much the happiness I have within my own life and the people I care about around me would be my quality of life.*" When defining quality of life, some observations were made with respect to access to services and having a perception of quality of life based on whether or not an individual had access to services and amenities. Barbara commented on how access to services and transportation can contribute to quality of life:

I think just having access, whether it is due to wealth, some of it due to who you know, some of it due to geography and how close you are to services if you can walk or drive. That can really play a role in people's perception. Or not their perception, their reality.

Jennifer observed that quality of life definition depends on the type of person experiencing it and what that experience means to the individual. She commented:

You do have to travel, take you a little bit longer and do more planning but that is the beauty of living here, you don't have to hustle and bustle, so it takes a particular person that this quality of life fits.

Ben observed that quality of life includes having an ease of doing things that you want to do by stating, "*I would also say it is very easy to do the things you want to do. So, I think the ease of doing what you want to do is a factor when determining your quality of life.*" Other participants, when asked to define quality of life, had much more succinct

definitions of what quality of life means to them. When asked how he would define quality of life, Jameson commented with a straightforward answer: “*Baseball.*” Another participant, Dale, commented about quality of life, stating, “*I don’t have to go to an outhouse. That’s a pretty good quality of life.*”

Subtheme 3b: Fulfillment of needs

The second subtheme to emerge from the data was *fulfillment of needs*. This subtheme is the result of many participants responding to the question of defining quality of life as being related to how needs are being met. Melanie observed that her definition of quality of life meant being able to relax and enjoy life. She stated, “*Having time to enjoy yourself or your family and food on ... you know, not having to worry about the essentials of life.*” Aaron commented in a similar fashion by stating, “*The basic human needs. Are they being met? You know, safety, food, the ... And I think you’re right, I think it is. I think it depends on what your perception is. Because it’s a philosophical issue.*” Another participant, Richard, commented with a similar observation that defining quality of life is going to come from what an individual needs in order to make that definition. He stated, “*Whatever the community has to offer that it meets your needs so that means that the quality of life would be different for each and every one of us.*”

Kathy was more specific about fulfillment of needs and quality of life and related it back to the community. She stated, “*I would go back to the resource thing again because if I have the resources I need within my community then my quality of life would be different.*” Jack commented with a similar observation, stating, “*It involves going to a grocery store, or restaurant, or downtown. Everybody knows everybody and you get the look of oh I know where he is from.*”

Martha observed the need for a livable wage as it relates to defining quality of life and resources. She observed, *“When people have livable wage jobs that they feel good about and can be invested in, that also allows them to have a higher quality of life and not have that worry.”* Other participants acknowledged the role of education and healthcare in fulfillment of needs as it relates to quality of life. Shawn commented, *“The quality of education and healthcare. The economic base of the community. If there is a good economic base, it adds to the quality of life.”* James added:

The quality of education and the access to healthcare. When I was thinking of quality of life, you know, maybe I wished it was slower paced or if you had a good quality of life it would be kind of a slower pace but I don’t know that really happens no matter where you live these days.

Subtheme 3c: Safety

The third subtheme, *safety*, emerged from the theme as participants referenced how defining quality of life, to them, meant being connected to and living in a safe place. Betty observed that having a safe place to live was a part of how she defined quality of life. She stated, *“I would define it as a safe place to live. With good education, a lot of entertainment type of activities, people involved in the community.”*

Other participants noted safety as a way of defining quality of life. Marlene commented on her definition of quality of life and what the term means to her. She stated, *“A safe place for my family. That’s why I’m here. That’s why I came back here. I was ready to raise a family and I knew I wasn’t going to raise them anywhere else.”* Anne added her observation of safety in defining quality of life, *“I think of secure or safe. You have your groups of people that you rely on. That is quality of life.”* Denise continued the observations on safety in defining quality of life by adding, *“There are things to do, but yet the safety and*

security and friendliness, it just kind of like close-knit community, that piece kind of overrides everything for me.”

Lynn made this observation about how she experiences quality of life through the affordable cost of living in her community:

So cost of living makes this place very, very high ... in quality of life. When we moved here, my oldest was in third grade and we got on our bike and we rode all around and across to Illinois to Wildcat Springs, and he got a paper route, and he was off. And, you know, that was what I wanted my kids to have, that freedom that I had.

Other participants noted travel time and commuting and how it fits into defining quality of life. Alicia commented on the safety of kids riding their bikes to school and how that is an example of quality of life due to community trust:

So quality of life for me is like my drive to and from work being 10 minutes, and I also love it that I see kids on my way - driving to and from work. I see kids on bikes, biking to school. In Louisville, you didn't see that. There was too much traffic. It's four lanes of traffic so you would never send a kid on. One of the coolest things to me is that you can put in all of the bike trails, you can do all of this stuff from city planning, but unless you have a community that actually trusts that their kids can walk out that door and ride their bike four blocks to school, you can't instill that community trust.

Subtheme 3d: Opportunity

The fourth subtheme that emerged from the data under theme 3 is *opportunity*. Joanna commented about different opportunities and how they consolidate into her impression of quality of life. She stated:

I think workforce, the quality of life obviously depends on if there are jobs for the family, for all the ages from kids up to the parents and in between. I agree that having a lot of services. I think culture. Having access to that wild Iowa, and we are a very white community but there seems to be a lot of culture still infused in and I think that is important to be exposed to that. I like the access of a county hospital but access to a large university hospital.

Vivian commented on opportunity in quality of life:

I think no matter what your definition of quality of life is, the opportunity is here to meet your quality of life. Might not have access to it right now, might be an education, might be a job that you need to access it. You might not have the resources, necessarily, but the opportunity is here for your version of your quality of life.

Other participants continued discussing opportunity as it relates to quality of life by talking about individual choice and seeking opportunities. Tim commented:

Logic goes to question, just life choices. It's pretty much what it boils down to. I made a few silly ones in high school, but I got out of them. Some people don't, though. You know, get a lot of the partying out of your system, and then grow up. You've just got to make adult choices. Easier said than done.

Todd added that the basic needs become important with defining quality of life. He stated, *"The basic stuff becomes more important, and that may be where you shift that to your quality, as opposed to looking beyond what's basic."* Amanda followed up with this observation, stating, *"I think sometimes those that fall into that cycle that, like I said earlier, it's hard for them to see that."*

Meredith contributed this observation to quality of life and opportunity:

Comes down to some of those choices you were talking about, decisions ... Making decisions. Your background, your support system, your lack of support system, all of those things create situations where you might make a different choice, or ... Or later you might wish you had made a different choice.

Theme 4: Quality of life in Southeast Iowa

The fourth theme to emerge from the data analysis in this study is *quality of life in Southeast Iowa*. From this theme, three subthemes emerged. The first subtheme, *friendliness*, will be presented in this section first followed by subtheme two, *natural environment*, and subtheme three, *accessibility*.

Subtheme 4a: Friendliness

The first subtheme to emerge under theme 4 was *friendliness*. Participants in each of the focus groups were asked how to identify quality of life in Southeast Iowa. Participants identified the personal connections and relationships that people form as one of the ways that quality of life exists in Southeast Iowa. Darren commented on friendliness as it relates to quality of life in Southeast Iowa. He stated, “*I think the people here in Southeast Iowa are friendlier and more caring and all of that. I think it’s kind of an overall how you feel when you’re here.*” Another speaker, James, commented on relationships as an important factor related to how quality of life exists in Southeast Iowa. He commented:

It has a lot to do with relationships and the relationships that you build and what you want for your kids and what you’d like to give them access to and the relationships they can have and the opportunities that they can have. I think that is why we stayed. The relationships.

Denise also commented on the closeness between people in Southeast Iowa as a way in which quality of life exists. She discussed how this closeness is demonstrated in the school districts and in the workplace. She remarked:

I think the schools are one place it exists. I think workplace is another. I think even in some of the larger workplace. I worked at Motorola here in town when it existed and we were up to almost 1,000 employees at one point in time but yet because we were in a closer more close-knit rural community, everyone knew everyone.

Joanna followed up with the way people come together in this region to form a quality of life that is unique to this area. She stated, “*It takes a village. It’s absolutely true. And I think this place particularly offers that. This region.*” Jennifer also commented on quality of life in Southeast Iowa. She commented on the qualities that she felt were specific to defining quality of life in this area. Jennifer commented, “*It’s the space. The*

opportunities. The friendliness. The 'if you really want to experience something its' there. You just go after it and people are there welcoming you."

Barbara commented, giving two specific examples that describe the personal connectedness of Southeast Iowa. She remarked:

We have 23 members on our board of directors so to just see people wanting to give their time to make the community better. The amount of volunteer hours that go into putting on events that we do and just a lot of people that want to be involved and support our organization and giving their time just to help make the community better. The close-knit community amongst farmers is amazing. If there are cows on the road, they don't call cops, they call you.

Joanna remarked with her observation about the community willingness to rally behind someone in need. She stated:

Responsiveness to what the community needs are and that should be considered a quality of life because people go back, they care, they want to make it better. People will stand back up. They will come back. They are going to fight for the community.

Subtheme 4b: Natural environment

The second subtheme to emerge from theme 4 was *natural environment*. Participants noted the natural, or physical, environment as a component to their perception of quality of life and how it is manifested in Southeast Iowa. Marlene commented about the natural environment and how it is an example of quality of life in this region:

I think one key thing that shows that quality of life exists is the space. Seeing nature everywhere you go, green, room to roam, blue skies, fresh air, going to the river and watching the river or just that you can take a deep breath and feel confident it is good, good air, its healthy, refreshing. I don't know how to describe it, but I think you got to have that space. Environment.

Lisa observed the role of the physical environment in her perception of how quality of life exists in Southeast Iowa. She stated:

In this region, we have the amenity of natural capital that we don't always remember as important to people. We have the Shimek Forest. When I start telling people about the things that you can do here that have nature involved in it (like Geode) to follow the trails through the villages of Van Buren or to see the Mormon trail. There are activities you can do throughout that area.

Ben noted as well, stating, *“Athletically there are a lot of opportunities, recreationally there are parks, river, outdoor recreation that is here as well.”* Joanna followed up as well on the role of the natural environment in her definition of quality of life in Southeast Iowa. She stated, *“Having to access the space to go for a bike ride or go for a run or jog and just what the communities in this area what they are focused on. Fitness and taking care of yourself.* Anne summarized her perception of the role of the natural environment on quality of life for residents in this region. She stated, *“They fish, they trap, they hunt.”*

Subtheme 4c: Accessibility

The third subtheme to emerge from the data under theme 4 was *accessibility*. Throughout each focus group, participants noted the physical location of Southeast Iowa to other regions. Participants also referenced accessibility as it relates to how people have access to education, recreation, culture, and a general access to opportunities. Clark commented:

I go back to quality of life being individualistic. It's very much based on the perception of that person. We recently moved to an outlying community but it is close to Burlington so we have the same amenities but don't have people necessarily quite as close from a living standpoint and so yeah, the quality of life is going to be very individualistic. I went to West Burlington schools. Anything I wanted to participate in whether I was talented in that area or not, I had the ability to because of the size of the class in school.

Another participant, Anne, commented about accessibility from her perspective as it related to high school students. She stated:

They have access to quality education, they have access to church, there is no reason not to feel safe in the community. They have access to cultural activities. Whether it be in their own school district or the community college or Iowa Wesleyan or drive to Fairfield to the Sondheim...there is culture around if they want to find it.

Robert followed up with his observation on accessibility in Southeast Iowa, particularly as it relates to being able to move around via transportation. He stated:

We have a great road system that helps us get anywhere we want in any quick time frame. We have Amtrak, you can get on a train, and we have two 4-lane highways right in the middle of the country so we have access. I think that is a quality of Southeast Iowa that a lot of rural communities don't have. We have a lot of people that chose this area to live in because of our easy access. They may work in Iowa City or Cedar Rapids.

Betty also commented on the proximity of Southeast Iowa to other communities as a way in which quality of life exists here. She noted:

I think what's nice about it is that is not a long drive if you want to Des Moines, Iowa City, Cedar Rapids. I like the small community; that is why when I lived in Minneapolis, I hated the traffic, driving an hour to get somewhere.

Another participant, Kevin, commented about how quality of life exists in Southeast Iowa through access to education through the community college:

We do have a lot of farms and a lot of the kids work the farm to be able to live at home and go to the community college and be able to go home and work it is very important to a lot of families in our area.

Theme 5: Community colleges possess various strengths and weaknesses

The fifth theme to emerge from the data analysis in this study is *community colleges possess various strengths and weaknesses*. Participants were asked to identify strengths and weaknesses of the community college. They responded with a variety of responses, indicating that the community college possesses strengths and weaknesses. From this theme, three subthemes emerged. The first subtheme, *strength: affordability*, is presented in this

section first followed by subtheme two, *strength: opportunities*, and subtheme three, *weakness: negative perceptions*.

Subtheme 5a: Strength: Affordability

The first subtheme was *strength: affordability*. Participants began discussing the low-cost and affordability of education at the community college. Jack commented, *“It’s a good thing for the parents, give you a little break on the payment.”*

Kevin followed up with the affordability of the community college and expanded further by acknowledging the role the community college can have in helping young people make the decision to stay in the rural community. Kevin commented:

You can’t send the kids off to a four-year school, so it is very important that we have low cost community college. I also think that it keeps the young people here a little bit longer and maybe they get to know the community a little bit better and make the decision to stay.

Clark commented using his personal experience with the community college, starting out there before transferring to a four-year institution. He remarked about the cost of attending the community college:

The value I got from two years at SCC cost me less than one semester at the private school I went to finish up my Bachelor’s. I could earn enough money in one semester to pay for one semester at SCC. It was a huge benefit to me and provided a good financial foundation as I got out of college that I wasn’t overburdened with student loan debt. It’s a big deal. And academically I was very prepared to go on to a four-year school.

Marlene responded with her own experience with the cost of a community college education for her son who has been able to take college coursework and participate in collegiate athletics. She observed, *“The affordability is definitely a strength. I have one child in the community college. So that has been an opportunity for him both to play sports and get a less expensive education.”* The low cost of the community college education,

coupled with the ability of students to take courses to explore potential majors and programs, was viewed as a strength of the community college. Joanna offered an observation relating the cost of attending the community college and the flexibility to explore interests. She remarked, *“It’s affordable, because the access is so close to home that it gives people the opportunity to test it out, “Is a two-year degree for me?” and if it is “Is a four-year degree for me?”*

James commented about his family’s experience with the affordability of the community college as it related to one of his children attending the community college and the transferability of community college coursework and the affordability of it. He remarked:

My child is going to get his Associates this spring. So, people don’t look down their nose at it as much anymore out of pure economic sense because its way more affordable and one of the great strengths that all of them have is the articulation agreements that they have with the universities. It’s spelled out. You can go on any one of their websites and say I want to be a mechanical engineer at the University of Iowa or Iowa State and it will give you the articulation and show you the classes. Pure affordability.

Subtheme 5b: Strength: Opportunities

The second subtheme was *strength: opportunities*. Participants began discussing the range of opportunities that the community college provided to students and potential students. These opportunities were viewed as services and programs that the community college was really successful at delivering to the communities served. Edward commented about how the community college expanded their programs and services and how this expansion impacted the community. Particularly, the expansion of community college programs to allow high school students to pursue college coursework was important to him.

He remarked:

I've liked how they have expanded their services. My brother went to two years of school out there. And my oldest daughter was able to take classes out there along with her high school courses and it was very beneficial for her and my youngest daughter is signing up for some classes that they can take now while they are in high school and its classes that she won't have to take when she gets to the college level.

Another participant, Clyde, talked about opportunities for students and potential students to pursue opportunities in career/technical education as well as general education coursework. He commented, *"I think there are lot of specialized disciplines like nursing that go on there or auto-body or welding, but then there is also the opportunity to have more broad range education too.* The expansion of relationships with the community was also recognized as a strength of the community college because of how these relationships impact the ability of the community college to provide stronger programs to help individuals acquire skills to be successful in the local workforce. Betty commented, *"I think, too, that the college has gotten much better and more open in working with the business community and trying to plan what kind of education and programming we need to keep workers skilled in the area."* Another participant, Darren, observed the strength of the community college's ability to adapt to the needs of the community. Once the community college is made aware of a need in the community, the institution is able to respond to address that need by having the flexibility to provide a solution. Darren observed:

Where they see a need for a program, they can offer it probably within a year at least so that is pretty quick. That ability, and being close in the community, to get not only to see and fill those needs but adapt and change and be able to offer programs that meet those needs.

Subtheme 5c: Weakness: Negative perceptions

The third subtheme was *weakness: negative perceptions*. Participants discussed some negative perceptions that they associated with the college. They discussed a variety of perceptions including lack of diversity, physical setting of campus not welcoming, a need for more integration with the community, perception of the college by traditional age students or high school students getting ready to graduate, and low quality standards. Starting with a lack of diversity, Clyde observed, “*I think weakness just may be diversity. Most people, obviously attracted to that school are from around here, you could view that as a weakness if there is one.*”

Another negative perception identified by participants was the physical setting of the college campus. Ben observed that the college’s campus location was “walled off in a way”. He commented that to passersby, the perception could be that the college does not want them on campus. Ben commented:

A weakness for me is I didn’t really feel that it is welcome to come here, explore here, here is the main entrance. It is kind of a bunker. It is changing. The Health Professions Building and the dorms are changing that image, taking out the swale from Gear, I think looks really good.

Other participants noted a need for a stronger integration of the community college into the community in order to better meet the needs of the business and industry in the community. A greater level of integration of the community college into the community could result in greater awareness of the college by stakeholders in the community. Kathy observed:

I would like to see our community college more integrated into the community and be our first thought of the community because it makes sense to me that if we do have manufacturing or do have business in town that need to have skilled workers for whatever area, I would love for them to immediately think,

I should work with SCC and see if we can get something figured out and I don't think that's on people's minds first.

Another participant, Richard, agreed with the need for more integration of the community college into the community in the area of job training for individuals to help people learn skills that will allow them to be qualified to move up into higher paying jobs.

He commented:

One program I would like to see the college get involved in, it will involve collaboration from the state and local businesses is job training. We need more job training to help with our employment. Although our employment rate down here is very low, that is exactly why we need more job training...so people can move from different jobs that they have to be retrained and go to a bigger and better job.

Barbara also commented about the need for the community college to increase its presence in the community. She discussed the need for increased awareness of programs and courses so that people in the community can be more knowledgeable about what programs and services the college is offering. Barbara observed:

I would like to see them more involved in the community. I would like to see more awareness. I know someone came and presented to some groups about the CNA classes, tuition assistance, adult Ed...and we're all like "nobody knew anything about that."

Another negative perception that was identified and discussed by participants was the perception that community college courses have lower standards than those of the four-year institutions. Marlene commented about her experience with hiring students from the community college and her perception that these students lacked the skills necessary to compete. She commented:

My concern about the community colleges, and I have seen this as a supervisor in a workforce when I'm trying to hire people. Sometimes I worry that their standards are not high enough in some of their programs that it is too easy for students. That's one thing I have encountered.

Another participant, Jennifer, also commented about the perception of community college students not being challenged academically like they might be by attending a four-year institution. She said:

I experienced this myself by going to a community college. When you go to a community college, it is an easier. Then when you transfer, you got those upper level courses that are a lot harder and then they ask more out of you. So maybe we don't prepare them for that.

Theme 6: Contribution of community college to quality of life is broad

The sixth theme to emerge from the data analysis in this study was *contribution of community college to quality of life is broad*. Three subthemes emerged from this theme. The first subtheme, *access and opportunity*, is presented in this section first, followed by subtheme 2, *economic impact and workforce development*, and subtheme 3, *community partnerships*.

Subtheme 6a: Access and opportunity

The first subtheme to emerge was *access and opportunity*. Participants in each of the focus groups discussed how the community college contributes to quality of life by providing access to education through opportunities. Access to education was not interpreted to just mean access to being able to attend classes towards a degree.

Participants discussed access to participating in athletic and cultural events as well as continuing education programs leading to general enrichment as a way of the community college contributing to quality of life. Participants spoke directly to what the impact that access to education has on their local community. In response to the question of how the community college contributes to quality of life, several participants in one focus group made a direct link between the community college and a quality of life impact in the community

they are located in. Melanie, Carol, and Alicia had a short dialogue that highlighted their perceptions.

Melanie:

Education.

Carol:

Yes, which leads to wages.

Alicia:

It's growth. It's the growth of our community... through a growth of education.

Carol:

I mean, if you have an education and then you get a job, then you contribute more to the community because you're aren't worrying. You don't have ... You have more time. You can volunteer more.

Darren commented on access to opportunities in the areas of athletic events that are the result of the community college. He stated:

You can go to basketball games, soon to be soccer, soon to be other things too so I think that alone is pretty good addition to the quality of life. Adding things to do. Also, I think some people in the community, although most people are from around here, it brings in some of the athletes, it brings in a little different mix into the community and that always kind of improves the quality of life somewhat.

Jennifer also addressed access to opportunity in athletics provided by the community college, stating, “*It also gives the kids an opportunity if they are in athletics to continue on. There is probably more of a chance to play in a community college than at a Division I school.*” Additionally, other participants noted that the community college offers the opportunity to study a variety of topics based on individual interests. Clyde commented, “*Having the opportunity to learn about whatever your interests are, different resources to*

learn and educate yourself on will enhance your quality of life. The opportunity is there.”

Other participants agreed with Clyde and echoed similar sentiments. Jennifer observed:

You can enhance your quality of life because it offers the learning opportunities. Whether it's to get a degree or just your general interests or wanting to upgrade your skills in computers it will enhance that quality of life through the educational component.

Joanna also commented about the access to opportunities at the community college and the flexibility of program offerings at the community college, stating, *“In a flexible way too, which I think is important. Not everyone can jump into a classroom and spend the day if they are working full-time so the different offerings of classes and the online, all of that.”*

Another participant, Betty, recognized the low cost of the community college and personal attention provided by the community college:

It is a less expensive way to go to school and smaller class size and I just think that traditional and nontraditional students get a lot more assistance, there's more available, more people to talk to if they are have problems. You kind of get lost in a university, or you can, and at SCC there is always someone available to help the students out.

Denise also recognized the environment of the community college and how the community college provides a closeness for students that larger campuses may not provide.

She remarked:

I would agree with that and then I would say also, kind of about that closeness of a small community. A community college has that same feel whereas like a university, like the University of Iowa, you don't necessarily have that same close feel with your fellow students that you get from a community college. You have more of a personal relationship with your teacher.

Todd also commented on the access to opportunities for personal attention that are available at the community college, stating, *“Class size...having 15, 20 students. You have a lot of personal interaction. Interpersonal interactions with the teachers are going to help*

them.” Marlene also commented on dual credit opportunities through the community college and the impact on high school students and families:

I go back to family, kids, the opportunities that it provides. The extra classes, the classes that they can do while they are in high school, the enrichment classes. All that stuff adds to the quality of life in one way or another. We would sorely miss it and we would feel the difference if we didn't have those opportunities for our kids, for ourselves, for our community.

Another participant, James, spoke to the opportunity the community college provides his family and one of his children:

One of the great strengths that all of them have is the articulation agreements that they have with the universities. It's spelled out. You can go on any one of their websites and say I want to be a mechanical engineer at the University of Iowa or Iowa State and it will give you, show you, the articulation and show you the classes. Pure affordability.

Subtheme 6b: Economic impact and workforce development

The second subtheme to emerge from the data analysis was *economic impact and workforce development*. Almost all participants noted that the community college had an impact or the potential to have an economic impact and an impact on workforce development. Brian remarked:

Doesn't the community college kind of become or is molded by the community itself based on what it needs from the local hospitals needing good nurses, so the community college has a nursing program to manufacturing needing certain skills they kind of depend on the community college to conform to that and provide that sort of service. Being able to adapt to what's going on or what they think the future might need.

Kevin followed up with a comment referencing economic impact of the community college. He stated, “*Other impacts on quality of life I think would be economic. The facilities that are provided, the infrastructure that is out there. That's a big thing for the community. I think the economic value of the community is huge.*” Joanna commented on the

community college role in contributing to workforce development, with particular focus on the broad range of impact the community college can have. She stated:

I think workforce. I think there has to be a thriving workforce. We need education for a lot of that whether it is soft skills, hard skills, trade, business degrees, going on and furthering that so I just think that quality of life. I am big proponent of culture and athletics. Anything that where you can broaden that experience in the community. And the community college can do all of that through that.

Robert also commented on workforce development:

From my experience, the strength we have is just being able to provide that workforce training that we need to train our people working at the industries in town. That is one of the important aspects to have is that access to the community college. They cater our program to them if they have to. They seem to do a good job from what I understand of trying to meet that demand.

Ben also spoke to the notion of how the community college contributes to quality of life by potentially impacting workforce development:

Workforce is the number one thing. It doesn't matter union or nonunion it's just people, you got to have the right people. Regionally we are able to tell a much better story about how we can develop and train and retrain our workforce with the community college. If we didn't have the community college here, and we had to go to Muscatine, Davenport, or Ottumwa I think it would be a really big disadvantage.

Another participant discussed the community college as a tool for recruiting new professionals to the community and the economic impact of that and the more immediate impact on individual families. Vivian commented:

Well, it helps when you're trying to recruit young professionals, even, or younger families, even families with teenage students, to move to this area, because they can see you have this community college right here, you can get your two years done before you go to Iowa or Iowa State. It's there, it's accessible.

Subtheme 6c: Partnerships

The third subtheme to emerge under theme 6 from the data analysis was *partnerships*.

This subtheme emerged as a result of ways in which participants identified the community college impacting quality of life through interactions with K-12 districts and businesses.

Kathy commented:

Partnerships with the agencies they serve. You have to be more than just an open door, you have to be a partner with them. That we create community partners and that we are all in it together and that whole community idea, that we're building what we need because it's not just there for us.

Specifically, participants discussed opportunities for high school students to take college courses. Aaron commented:

Well, good or bad, dual-credit courses. We have high school students who are, you know, getting a year ... At least a semester, if not more. There's a lot of initiatives out there for people to get education, whether it's online, whether it's night classes, whether it's whatever. But we are very lucky that we have the building in our community. And then, just as a side note, I like having girls' basketball team, because they're fun to watch, too. So, there's some social interaction, you know, with that. But I think we are very lucky that we do have the, the building here, and the options that we have.

Other participants also noted the partnerships that the community college has with industries in the region and how the college is able to respond to the needs of industry.

Alicia commented:

I think the community college is an amazingly powerful asset to our community. And I think they're amazingly responsive to the needs of our community with this new technology center. That is a specific need that the industry identified and within a very short amount of time, we now have a building and a plan, and not only just a, a need identified, but there is a course of action of how we want to address that problem. And in education, it takes longer to get those pieces into place, so I feel like the community college was way quicker to act based on a need.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of this study. Six major themes emerged out of the data collected and analyzed from the six focus group interviews: *rural means different things to people; rural sense of community; quality of life is broadly defined; quality of life in Southeast Iowa; community colleges possess various strengths and weaknesses; and contribution of community college to quality of life is broad.*

The first section of this chapter addressed the first major theme, *rural means different things to people*. Within the first theme, three subthemes were identified that contributed to how individuals defined the concept of ‘rural’. The first subtheme was location and agriculture. Participants used the location of a place to help describe their perception of what it means to define ‘rural.’ They described the physical setting of a place and the existence of agricultural activity in that place as being a contributor to how to define rural.

The second subtheme was resources. Participants identified a lack of resources, or a lack of ability to access resources or amenities easily, as being a contributing factor to how to define rural. Participants noted that part of the definition of rural stems from having to travel distances from their community in order to access some amenities that are usually available in larger populated areas. The third subtheme noted in the first section was rural challenges. Participants noted specific challenges that they felt contributed to how they defined what it meant to be rural.

The second major theme, *rural sense of community*, was addressed in the second section of this chapter. This theme revealed that two subthemes, personal connections and relationships, along with trust, are key elements of how a rural community is defined. Related to the first subtheme, personal connections and relationships, participants described a

rural community as being a “tight-knit” place where people know each other and take care of each other. This was a crucial piece of the way in which participants identified what a rural community was. The second subtheme in this section was trust. Participants described how people build a level of trust in a rural community. This trust element is a significant part of the way relationships are built and people live their lives in the rural community.

The third major theme that emerged from the data was *quality of life is broadly defined*. From this theme, four subthemes were identified. The first subtheme is individual experience. Participants noted that how an individual defines quality of life is sometimes the result of what they are looking for. It was discussed that some people define quality of life as having basic needs met, while other people might define quality of life based on recreation opportunities. The second subtheme is fulfillment of needs. Participants defined quality of life in terms of how an individual had their specific needs met. Quality of life was defined in terms of how well the community, as a place, was able to respond to meeting the needs of people there. Access to the grocery store, the doctor’s office, and places like that meant quality of life. The third subtheme was safety. Having a safe place to live and work meant quality of life. Quality of life meant being in a community that was safe enough to raise a family. Finally, the fourth subtheme was opportunity. Participants used the word opportunity to refer to different things, such as opportunities in the workforce, opportunities in education, and recreational opportunities. Other participants noted opportunity was a general term that was open-ended so that individuals could create their own opportunity.

The fourth major theme that emerged from the data was *quality of life in Southeast Iowa*. From this theme, three subthemes were identified and presented in the findings. First, the subtheme of friendliness was presented. Participants noted that in Southeast Iowa,

quality of life exists because people are friendly and this is significant. Participants discussed how people in Southeast Iowa express a genuine interest in getting to know people and caring about life events.

The second subtheme to be presented was the natural environment. Participants noted that quality of life existed in Southeast Iowa through the natural environment. The physical setting, the natural landscape, contributed to quality of life in Southeast Iowa because of the opportunities presented for people to interact with the natural environment through recreation. The third subtheme to be presented under this theme was accessibility. Participants noted the level of accessibility to and from the Southeast Iowa region contributed to the quality of life that exists here. Participants noted how easily residents of Southeast Iowa were able to access shopping and cultural events, and business travel, by road or train.

The fifth major theme that emerged from the data was *community colleges possess various strengths and weaknesses*. This theme emerged from the various responses in which participants noted the different strengths and weaknesses that they perceive the community college to have. From this theme, three subthemes emerged and were presented: *strength: affordability, strength: opportunities, and weakness: negative perceptions*. Under the first subtheme, participants noted that one of the strengths of the community college was the affordability of pursuing educational opportunities there. They discussed how the low cost of the programs was a strength of the community college. The second subtheme, *strength: opportunities*, reflected how participants identified one of the strengths of the community college as providing access and opportunity to participate in higher education. The third subtheme that emerged under theme five was *weakness: negative perceptions*. This resulted

from how the participants responded to identifying weaknesses of the community college. Participants discussed a variety of perceptions including lack of diversity, physical setting of campus not welcoming, a need for more integration with the community, perception of the college by traditional age students or high school students getting ready to graduate, and low quality standards.

Finally, the sixth major theme that emerged from the data was *contribution of community college to quality of life is broad*. This theme emerged from the various responses in which participants noted the different ways in which they perceived the community college as contributing to quality of life. From this theme, three subthemes emerged and were presented. The first subtheme was access and opportunity. Participants noted that one of the ways that the community college contributes to quality of life is by providing access and opportunity to participate in higher education. This was significant because of the challenges that rural communities sometimes face. Participants noted that individuals could increase their quality of life by participating in programs offered by the community college. The second subtheme presented here was economic impact and workforce development. Participants noted that workforce development was a significant way in which the community college contributed to quality of life. The programs and services offered by the community college are perceived as a crucial way in which the community college can improve quality of life. The third subtheme presented under theme five was partnerships. Participants noted that the community college contributes to quality of life through partnerships with K-12 school districts and industries in the region. They commented that the community college is able to increase access for potential students to participate in programs and courses at the college and address the needs of specific industries

in the region by providing opportunities for people to enhance their skills to become employed at local industries.

Chapter 5 provides an examination of the findings based on the research questions. It also includes the limitations and implications, offers recommendations for future research, and provides the researcher's personal reflections upon completing the study.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The final chapter provides a brief summary of the study, examines the findings and the relationship of these findings to related research, discusses the limitations, implications for practice, and offers recommendations for future research. It concludes with the researcher's personal reflection.

Summary

This study examined the role of the small, community college in contributing to quality of life in a rural community. The purpose of this study was to explore how the small, rural community college contributes to producing quality of life in a rural community. There was a need for this study because of a void in the existing literature as it relates to understanding how the small, rural community college contributes to quality of life. This process was studied through the collection and analysis of data from participants in focus group interviews in three separate rural communities. Data were collected using six focus group interviews, two interviews in each community.

This study explored how individuals within the study area define rural and rural community, defined quality of life, and how they viewed the community college as being a contributor to quality of life in the region. A qualitative methodological approach was an appropriate tactic for this study because it provided a way to explore the research questions presented earlier in this study directly through data collection from individuals living in the region that is the study area for this research. Case study analysis was utilized as the method for this study because it involves “an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units” (Baxter, 2016, p. 130).

A total of 39 participants were included in this study. The focus group interviews took place in Keokuk, Iowa; Burlington, Iowa; and Mount Pleasant, Iowa. The research questions for this study were designed to explore perceptions of the small, rural community college and how it contributes to quality of life in a rural community. Participants in this study included individuals who: (1) were 18 years of age or older; (2) lived in or worked in one of three communities in the study area where the community college has a campus or a center; (3) had a position within the community in which they were likely to be in a leadership role; and (4) were likely to have an awareness of the community college activities in the community.

The data were collected through focus group interviews. Each focus group was audio recorded and a transcript was produced from the recording. Each transcript was coded using a two-cycle coding process. The first cycle of coding was completed using descriptive coding. The second cycle of coding was completed using pattern coding. This coding process allowed for theme development within the data. Five major themes were identified and fifteen subthemes. The application of these themes to current research and to the research questions of this study are presented in the following sections.

Research Questions and Findings

This section provides a discussion of the findings of this study as they related to the original research questions. A discussion of the results as they relate to the current literature and theoretical framework is also included. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do community leaders define *rural* and *rural community*?
2. How do community leaders define *quality of life*?

3. What do community leaders perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the small rural, community college?
4. What is the role of the small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life in a rural community?

Research Question 1: How do community leaders define *rural* and *rural community*?

The first two themes developed from the data helped to provide an answer to this research question. The first theme, *rural means different things to people*, was identified because of how participants responded to defining what the term ‘rural’ meant. From this theme, three subthemes were identified which provided further explanation of how participants defined “rural”. The three subthemes, *location and agriculture*, *resources*, and *rural challenges*, provide a closer exploration of how the term ‘rural’ is perceived and defined by individuals in this study.

Location and agriculture were important to participants in terms of how the term rural is perceived and defined. The location of the place being identified and defined as rural was important to how participants decided what constituted a ‘rural’ place. For some participants, a sense of place was characterized by their responses. Sense of place was identified by a connection to location and agriculture. From the findings in Chapter 4, a comment by one of the participants, Clyde, summarized defining rural with location and agriculture. “*I would say location, where maybe a majority where a great deal of the economy revolves around agricultural things as far as crop production and things like that.*” Other participants provided similar responses to this question by offering, “*When I think of rural, I think of where farming is the driver, that local economy.*” Another participant stated

a similar response, “*When you say rural, I immediately think agriculture and agriculture base. You know, a base of the economy. Whether it’s accurate or not that’s what I think of.*”

The first subtheme in theme one can also be discussed using the existing literature on sense of place as a lens. In this study, sense of place is defined using Hay (1988) to operationalize this concept. Based on Hay (1988), sense of place is defined as a personal connection with place that is made up of three elements: perception, emotions, and experiences with a place. In discussing location as a way in which they defined rural, it is important to note that participants referenced place as a crucial component. From this discussion, rural can be defined as place-based, making a specific place, and its qualities and characteristics, important to how people perceive and define rural and rural community. These references to place are related most closely to place attachment in sense of place literature. Place attachment refers to the qualities and characteristics that contribute to the ways in which people become emotionally connected to a specific place. The way in which participants defined rural demonstrated that they were defining this concept using their perception, their emotional connection, and their experience with the place that they identified as being rural. From the findings, it was evident that how people identify and characterize the concept of *rural* and perceive a *rural community* is derived from their individual perceptions of what a rural community is, their emotional connection, or the feelings that they develop while in a rural community, and their experiences within a community they identify as rural.

The second subtheme, *resources*, of theme one spoke to another way in which participants defined what the term “rural” meant to them. Participants spoke of proximity of access to resources as important to how the term ‘rural’ was defined. Kathy was first to

comment on resources, *“I think I would put it down to resources. You can’t easily access a lot of resources so therefore I would consider this whole area to be rural because we have to travel or work out how we get the things we need as well just over all.”* Another participant, Kevin, followed up with, *“I would consider a community that probably lacks some of the amenities that are easily accessible for most people maybe like a grocery store or I can’t think of any other examples but volunteer fire departments.”* The responses related to proximity of access to resources spoke about how participants aligned their definitions of rural to whether or not residents in the community had ready access to things that participants defined as resources or whether residents had to travel distances to access those resources.

The third subtheme, *rural challenges*, of theme one reflected challenges that participants identified as being specific challenges to rural communities. These challenges influenced how they defined what it meant to be ‘rural’ and varied in type. One participant, Lynn commented, *“I would say a lot of our challenges are industries leaving and employment.”* Another participant, Marcia, also commented, *“I will say, for jobs, we’ve lost a lot of manufacturing jobs. That’s affected us, I think, a lot. Because, I think that we have a lot of empty business buildings that are just sitting there, and then they just deteriorate, which I think looks bad for the community.”*

The second theme identified in the data also helped to provide an answer to this research question. The second theme, *rural sense of community*, was identified because of how participants responded to defining what the term ‘rural community’ meant. From this theme, two subthemes were identified which provided further explanation of how participants defined “rural community”. The two subthemes, *personal connections and*

relationships, and *trust*, provide a closer exploration of how the term ‘rural community’ is perceived and defined by individuals in this study.

Personal connections and relationships formed the first subtheme that emerged from theme two in the findings. One participant spoke of the nature of the rural community being linked to friendly people. Denise commented, “*I think about friendliness. People that - kind of like you know everyone or if you don’t know everyone, you are one or two people away from being connected with pretty much everyone.*” Another participant followed up with, “*I think there is a lot more personal connections in a rural community than there would be in urban community. Just like what she said, maybe once or twice removed but you know the family, you know somebody, so you feel like you’re part of something.*” Participants noted that defining the rural community meant “*You know everybody*” and “*Relationships.*”

The second subtheme, *trust*, that emerged from theme two helped explain how participants defined the rural community. Participants discussed the factor of trust and how important it was to how they defined the rural community because of the personal connections that are made in, and relied on, in the rural community. They spoke of trust being an important element in the definition of a rural community because trust is part of the networking that occurs in defining a rural community. One participant noted, “*It’s a slower pace. People are not as much in a hurry. They are content to being on the pickup bed truck and just chit chat for a while. It’s not the networking you learn in business.*” Another participant noted a similar observation by commenting, “*Business connections are made out and about. It’s not in offices or behind doors, it’s made at the coffee shops, made in the places where people are socially and that’s how the connections are seemed to be made.*”

Research Question 2: How do community leaders define *quality of life*?

The third and fourth themes developed from the data helped to provide an answer to this research question. The third theme, *quality of life is broadly defined*, was identified because of how participants responded to defining what the term ‘quality of life’ meant. The fourth theme, *quality of life in Southeast Iowa*, also emerged from how participants responded to defining quality of life but focused specifically on how quality of life exists in Southeast Iowa. Both themes will be discussed here in terms of how they address the research question regarding how community leaders define quality of life.

Under theme three, four subthemes emerged from the data: *individual experience*, *fulfillment of needs*, *safety*, and *opportunity*. Under theme four, there were three subthemes that emerged from the data in terms of how participants identified quality of life existing in Southeast Iowa: *friendliness*, *natural environment*, and *accessibility*.

Quality of life is broadly defined

Individual experience formed the first subtheme that emerged from theme three in the findings. It became clear that how an individual might define the term quality of life could be determined by their own individual experience. For many participants, defining quality of life depends on what the individual is looking for. In other words, the way in which a participant defines quality of life is going to be subjective, based on that individual’s experience, needs, and desires. Brian commented on defining quality of life, “*It’s pretty arbitrary in a way.*” Another participant, Jack concurred by stating, “*It’s very subjective actually. What you have available to you that makes you happy and if you are not happy with what is available to you, you move to somewhere where there is if you want less or more so whatever is around.*”

The second subtheme, *fulfillment of needs*, to emerge from theme three also helped explain how participants defined the term quality of life. This was reinforced by a participant, Aaron, who stated, “*The basic human needs. Are they being met? You know, safety, food, the*” In addition, another participant, Richard, commented with a similar observation, “*If the place that you live meets the needs that you’re looking for. If the entertainment is important that would be the case. If exercise is important, if it could offer that. If your job is important. Whatever the community has to offer that it meets your needs so that means that the quality of life would be different for each and every one of us.*” This reflects how quality of life can be defined by what needs an individual has and how those needs are met.

The third subtheme, *safety*, emerged from theme three as a result of how participants mentioned the element of feeling safe in the community when talking about how they would define quality of life. It was important to participants that they feel comfortable and safe in their environment. Safety was important for feeling like they could raise their families and fulfill their needs and wants. One participant noted that defining quality of life meant, “*I would define it as a safe place to live.*” Another participant commented that quality of life meant “*A safe place for my family. That’s why I’m here. That’s why I came back here. I was ready to raise a family and I knew I wasn’t going to raise them anywhere else.*”

The fourth subtheme, *opportunity*, emerged from theme three as a result of one of the ways in which participants defined quality of life. Opportunities meant opportunities to find jobs, participate in recreational activities, educational opportunities, amenities, and general opportunities to fulfill their needs. Participants discussed opportunities in workforce as being

important because families need to be able to find work in order to take part in other opportunities related to education and culture, plus the natural recreational opportunities.

Quality of life in Southeast Iowa

The fourth theme, *quality of life in Southeast Iowa*, also addressed research question three in terms of how community leaders define quality of life. This theme emerged from the data in response to how participants responded to one of the interview questions, “How does quality of life exist here in Southeast Iowa?” Participants responded in ways that produced three subthemes from the data: *friendliness*, *natural environment*, and *accessibility*.

The first subtheme, *friendliness*, emerged from the fourth theme due to how participants responded when asked about how quality of life existed in the Southeast Iowa region. Participants noted that people develop strong personal connections and relationships with each other and the nature of these relationships leads to a positive quality of life. One participant noted the friendliness of the region compared to other regions in the state by noting, “*I think it is better than some of the other places I have lived. I have lived in NW Iowa for a few years and I wasn’t very happy there. I really can’t quantify why, it was just more of a feeling of sort of the way the people were than down here. I think the people here in Southeast Iowa are friendlier and more caring and all of that. I think it’s kind of an overall how you feel when you’re here.*” Participants noted that the ability to develop relationships in the region was an important piece of how they define quality of life. These relationships are crucial to developing opportunities to raise family, build a support system, and enjoy the opportunities that present themselves in this region.

The second subtheme, *natural environment*, refers to another way in which participants recognized how quality of life exists here in Southeast Iowa. Participants

discussed the natural, physical, environment as a way in which quality of life is defined. One participant noted, *“I think one key thing that shows that quality of life exists is the space. Seeing nature everywhere you go, green, room to roam, blue skies, fresh air, going to the river and watching the river or just that you can take a deep breath and feel confident it is good, good air, it’s healthy, refreshing.* Another participant, Joanna, mentioned, *“Even just having the trails. Having to access the space. To go for a bike ride or go for a run or jog and just what the communities in this area what they are focused on. Fitness and taking care of yourself.”* Lisa added, *“In this region, we have the amenity of natural capital that we don’t always remember as important to people. We have the Shimek Forest. When I start telling people about the things that you can do here that have nature involved in it (like Geode) to follow the trails through the villages of Van Buren or to see the Mormon trail. There are activities you can do throughout that area.”*

Finally, the third subtheme, *accessibility*, to emerge from theme four relates to how accessible participants described the Southeast Iowa region as being. They discussed how it was this accessibility to other parts of the state, more populated communities that led residents of this region to experience quality of life by being able to access opportunities in other areas. Participants discussed the Southeast Iowa region as having a good infrastructure system of roads, and a railway that allows residents to access cities and other areas while being able to live here.

Research Question 3: What do community leaders perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the small, rural community college?

The fifth theme developed from the data helped to provide an answer to this research question. The fifth theme, *community colleges possess various strengths and weaknesses*,

was identified because of how participants responded to the question of what they perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses displayed by the community college. Under this theme, three subthemes emerged from the data: *strength: affordability*, *strength: opportunities*, and *weakness: negative perceptions*.

Strength: affordability was the first subtheme that emerged from theme five in the findings. In all six of the focus group interviews, the perception that the community college is strong at providing an affordable education at a low cost was discussed. Jack commented, “*It’s a good thing for the parents, give you a little break on the payment.*” Participants discussed this as being an important strength. Joanna offered an observation relating the cost of attending the community college and the flexibility to explore interests. She remarked, “*It’s affordable, because the access is so close to home that it gives people the opportunity to test it out, “Is a two-year degree for me?” and if it is “Is a four-year degree for me?”*” The affordability of a community college education was important to participants because it also allows young people to explore their interests without paying a higher cost for tuition at a four-year institution. Clark commented on his experience paying a lower cost at the community college in two years compared to paying the cost for one semester at a private four-year institution. Clark commented, “*The value I got from two years cost me less than one semester at the private school I went to finish up my Bachelor’s degree.*”

The second subtheme, *strength: opportunity*, emerged from the data under theme five. This subtheme was the result of how participants responded to identifying their perception of strengths of the community college. Participants perceived the community college to be strong in the area of providing opportunity for people to access an education. Participants discussed the opportunities to pursue career and technical education programs, specialized

programs, such as nursing or automotive technology, as well as general education or transfer coursework. Clyde commented, *“I think there are lot of specialized disciplines like nursing that go on there or auto-body or welding, but then there is also the opportunity to have more broad range education too.* The expansion of relationships with the community was also recognized as a strength of the community college because of how these relationships impact the ability of the community college to provide stronger programs to help individuals acquire skills to be successful in the local workforce. Betty commented, *“I think, too, that the college has gotten much better and more open in working with the business community and trying to plan what kind of education and programming we need to keep workers skilled in the area.*

The third subtheme, *weakness: negative perception*, emerged from the data under theme five as a result of perceived weaknesses that participants discussed. There was not a primary weakness that stood out from the weaknesses discussed, rather participants simply identified what they perceived as a weakness. They discussed a variety of negative perceptions including lack of diversity, physical setting of campus not welcoming, a need for more integration with the community, perception of the college by traditional age students or high school students getting ready to graduate, and low-quality standards. Starting with a lack of diversity, Clyde observed, *“I think weakness just may be diversity. Most people, obviously attracted to that school are from around here, you could view that as a weakness if there is one.”* Another negative perception identified by participants was the physical setting of the college campus. Ben observed that the college’s campus location was “walled off in a way”. He commented that to passersby, the perception could be that the college does not want them on campus. The college campus needs to be more inviting, more open, and he

commented that with the construction of the new facilities this was changing in a positive way.

Other participants noted a need for a stronger integration of the community college into the community in order to better meet the needs of the business and industry in the community. A greater level of integration of the community college into the community could result in greater awareness of the college by stakeholders in the community. Barbara also commented about the need for the community college to increase its presence in the community. She discussed the need for increased awareness of programs and courses so that people in the community can be more knowledgeable about what programs and services the college is offering. Barbara observed:

I would like to see them more involved in the community. I would like to see more awareness. I know someone came and presented to some groups about the CNA classes, tuition assistance, adult education...and we're all like "nobody knew anything about that."

Another negative perception that was identified and discussed by participants was the perception that community college courses have lower standards than those of the four-year institutions. Marlene commented about her experience with hiring students from the community college and her perception that these students lacked the skills necessary to compete. She commented:

My concern about the community colleges, and I have seen this as a supervisor in a workforce when I'm trying to hire people. Sometimes I worry that their standards are not high enough in some of their programs that it is too easy for students. That's one thing I have encountered.

Research Question 4: What is the role of the small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life in a rural community?

The sixth theme identified in the data helped to provide an answer to this research question. The sixth theme, *contribution of community college to quality of life is broad*, was identified because of how participants perceived the community college contributing to quality of life. Three subthemes were identified from theme six: *access and opportunity*, *economic impact and workforce development*, and *partnerships*. These subthemes speak to the ways in participants observed the community college contributing to quality of life.

Access and opportunity formed the first subtheme that emerged from theme six in the findings. In this subtheme, participants discussed how they perceive the community college providing access to opportunities to participate in cultural and athletic events. They noted that one of the ways in which the community college contributed to quality of life was to provide opportunities to students to participate in sports in the collegiate environment because of increased competition to participate at more advanced levels at larger colleges and universities. One participant, Jennifer, observed, “*It also gives the kids an opportunity if they are in athletics to continue on. There is probably more of a chance to play in a community college then at a Division I school.*”

Other participants observed the community college contributed to quality of life by providing access to participate in furthering their education, whether it was to take courses towards a degree or for general interest. Clyde observed, “*Having the opportunity to learn about whatever your interests are, different resources to learn and educate yourself on will enhance your quality of life. The opportunity is there.*” Another participant noted, “*You can enhance your quality of life because it offers the learning opportunities. Whether it’s to get a*

degree or just your general interests or wanting to upgrade your skills in computers it will enhance that quality of life through the educational component.”

The second subtheme, *economic impact and workforce development*, under theme six was the result of another way that participants identified how the community college contributes to quality of life. Participants noted that the community college offers programs and services that are designed to meet the specific needs of industries in the region. They discussed how workforce development occurs through access to educational opportunities provided by the community college. One participant, Robert, observed, *“From my experience, the strength we have is just being able to provide that workforce training that we need to train our people working at the industries in town. That is one of the important aspects to have is that access to the community college.”* Participants noted the economic impact of the community college comes from the infrastructure it creates and the adaptability to meet the needs of industry, providing opportunities for individuals to acquire skills to qualify for jobs in the region. They noted the overall impact that this has on increasing quality of life for people.

The third subtheme to emerge under theme six was *partnerships*. Participants noted how important partnerships between the community college and K-12 districts, along with industries, were contributing to quality of life. They discussed how partnerships with the school districts led to opportunities for students in the high schools to participate in dual-credit courses. Participants also discussed partnerships between the community college and local agencies, like the fire department, and the relationships that are built as a result of partnerships lead to improved provision of services and an improved community.

Discussion of Theoretical Framework

The use of a two-part theoretical framework, Community Capitals Framework and Sense of Community Theory, was beneficial to this study in that it provided a lens through which a complex concept such as quality of life can be further understood. The framework helped to explain how the terms “rural”, “rural community”, and “quality of life” can be better understood. The deeper understanding of these concepts can then be pieced together to forge a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which the small, rural community college is perceived to be a contributor to quality of life in a rural community.

The first part of the theoretical framework involved the Community Capitals Framework presented by Flora and Flora (2008) in the third edition of their 1993 book, *Rural Communities*, and presented by Emery and Flora (2006). This framework provides seven “assets” (Emery & Flora, 2006) that are components of a broader system (the community itself is the system) (Emery & Flora). These assets are viewed as capitals and are used to explain how communities exist and function. This framework was helpful in exploring perceptions of quality of life, how this concept exists, and the ways in which the small, rural community college contributes to quality of life.

Using the Community Capitals Framework, the most noticeable way in which the community college contributes to quality of life is by developing human capital and social capital. Human capital is the competencies and abilities of people to cultivate and grow their access to resources, knowledge and information (Emery & Flora, 2006). This, in turn, would allow individuals to develop the ability to improve their standard of living and overall quality of life using any one of the variety of definitions presented in the findings. Improving human capital could lead to increased opportunities to provide for basic needs being met, accessing

recreational opportunities, being able to access cultural amenities outside of the rural community, and experience quality of life.

Another way in which the community college contributes to quality of life is by providing opportunities to develop social capital. Through the programs and services offered to the community college, particularly in the area of workforce and economic development, but also through partnerships, the opportunity to increase social capital is acknowledged and enhanced. The community college can act as a conduit between people and organizations within the community. Increasing awareness between people and organizations about services, programs, and opportunities can lead to actions taken to further develop opportunities for people to acquire knowledge and information, thus developing competencies that allow them to increase human capital.

The second part of the theoretical framework is Sense of Community Theory. Sense of Community Theory is based on four components: *Membership* is a feeling that one has invested parts of oneself to become a member and, therefore, has a right to belong (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It has a feeling of belonging, of being a part of something. The second element is *influence*, which is a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and that the group matters to its members (McMillan & Chavis). Members of a community have to feel a trustworthiness among members in order to be able to speak freely within the community (McMillan & Chavis). This ability to speak freely is what helps build the spirit within a community (McMillan, 1996). McMillan and Chavis (1986) demonstrated that members are attracted to a community in direct relation to their emotional sense of it (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The third element is *integration and fulfillment of needs*. This is the feeling that member's needs will be met by the resources

received through their membership in the group, or the community (McMillan & Chavis). Lastly, the fourth element is *shared emotional connection*. This is the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis).

Sense of Community Theory was helpful in this study because it provided a way in which the concept of rural community was able to be further explained. This theory helps address the second research question which speaks to defining the concept *rural community*. The findings identified in theme two, *rural sense of community*, can be further explained using Sense of Community Theory and help lay the foundation for further explanation using the Community Capitals Framework.

From the findings in theme two from Chapter 4 of this study, the concept of rural community was defined primarily by the recognition of personal connections and relationships as well through the building of trust. These findings are significant because they represent integration and fulfillment of needs along with shared emotional connection. Integration and fulfillment of needs acknowledges that when people feel they are part of the community, this feeling contributes to an additional feeling of satisfaction that individual needs are being met.

Integration and fulfillment of needs contributes significantly to how people in the Southeast Iowa region perceive their community and how this community meets their needs. The personal connections and relationships contribute to the building of trust among residents and represent membership, influence, and shared emotional connection. The relationships and personal connections help individuals to develop a feeling that they belong here. As a result of feeling they belong, those individuals develop a stronger sense that they

belong to something larger, they belong to a larger community and, as a result, they begin to recognize that their individual actions have impacts on the broader community.

Limitations

As discussed in Chapter 3, the researcher took steps to ensure the trustworthiness of the study by establishing credibility through triangulation, member checking, and peer review. While effort was made by providing thick description, using member checks, and peer debriefings, there were several limitations to this study.

Although there were 39 participants in this study over six focus group interviews, one of the limitations of this study was the selection of the sample. The researcher selected participants using the selection criteria discussed earlier in this study. As a result, the data presented here in this study are limited to the experiences of the individuals who participated in the sample. The participants in this study were all Caucasian individuals and would likely be described as middle class. Therefore, the data are limited to the perceptions and experiences of the sample.

Another limitation is the generalizability of the findings. As a case study, the researcher is bound to the case and those participants within it (Creswell, 1998). The findings that emerged from the data collected in this study are limited to this study. The findings of this study are not necessarily representative of other regions around the country.

Another limitation is researcher positionality. I strictly adhered to being neutral in this study and, as a result, the participants in this study controlled the flow of comments during focus group interviews. I did not ask probing questions. This could be a limitation because I might have been able to get a deeper understanding of rural, rural community,

quality of life, and the role of the community college in contributing to quality of life. I wanted the data to be as “raw” and “organic” as possible.

Implications for Practice

Rural communities face their own unique challenges to existing and surviving in today’s society. An article published on January 31, 2017, in the *Community College Daily* highlighted challenges such as population decline, higher rates of poverty and unemployment, and an increasing shortage of skilled workers for available jobs (Ashford, 2017). As a result, rural community colleges play a critical role in supporting rural communities and are “critical to the success of their communities, yet they often don’t get the recognition they deserve” (Ashford, p. 1). The role of the small, rural community college in the rural community is important enough that the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) created a new commission to provide further study to the idea of “what it means to be a small, rural college” (Ashford & Dembicki, 2018, p. 1). A November 15, 2018, article published in the *Community College Daily*, the publication of the American Association of Community Colleges, discussed the AACC Commission on Small and Rural Colleges and their work to better understand how small, rural colleges “...fit into the social and economic development of rural America” (Ashford & Dembicki, p. 1). These recent developments highlight the importance of furthering our understanding of rural community colleges.

Analysis of the study’s data demonstrated the complexity of experience and meaning that have come from the exploration of the small, rural community college and how it contributes to quality of life in a rural community. Despite the limitations of this study, there are several ways in which this study contributes to the existing literature. As discussed

previously in Chapter 1 of this study, there has been a void in the literature as it relates specifically to how the small, rural community college contributes to quality of life.

This study has revealed that the concepts of rural, rural community, and quality of life derive their meaning from individual experiences. One of the ways that this study contributes to existing literature is by providing a significant contribution to help further develop an understanding of what it means to be rural, what it means to be a rural community, how the concept of quality of life exists, and how the small, rural community college contributes to quality of life in a rural community. In order to further develop an understanding of how the small, rural community college contributes to quality of life, the most important question in this study, it was imperative that the study explore the concepts of rural, rural community, and quality of life first. While this study has limitations, this study focused on exploring perceptions of community leaders in three separate communities and how those community leaders perceived rural, rural community, and quality of life. This study used six focus group interviews over three separate communities to explore the concepts of rural, rural community, quality of life, and develop a better understanding of how community leaders view the community college as contributing to quality of life. This study helped put a specific focus on this important issue.

In doing so, this study provides a framework for additional study by scholars and practitioners to replicate this study and gather additional data that could contribute to continuing to build upon the current literature on rural, rural community, quality of life, and community colleges. This study will also assist community leaders and community college administrators in further developing their understanding of the work produced by the community college and the perceived role of the community college in the community by

providing important insight from the data that is derived from participants who live and work in the communities in this study region.

When responding to increased accountability from state and federal officials, community college stakeholders should be better able to articulate their work by applying the findings in this study. Federal and state officials are placing increasing accountability measures in place for community colleges. Community colleges, and educational institutions, often find themselves in a position where they have to explain, justify and defend their work and use of taxpayer funding to elected officials and policy makers. This study may also help local community college stakeholders by providing the framework to develop a narrative to use in explaining local community college actions to policy makers and elected officials using insight gleaned from local community leaders' perceptions.

Future Research

In some sense, there is a pretty standard view of the mission and purpose of the community colleges and the work that they produce. However, in today's society, community colleges are facing increasing scrutiny in terms of accountability measures, student success, increasing calls for performance-based funding. As a result, community colleges are experiencing increased pressure to perform at a higher level. It is important for community colleges to act strategically in ways that allow them to increase their capacity to impact on multiple levels – students, industries, individual communities, and the region. The following section outlines two recommendations for future research.

1. Additional qualitative inquiry exploring perceptions of community college

While the mission and purpose of the community college are still fairly clear in terms of intent, the reality is that in today's society, community colleges have evolved since their

inception around 50 years ago. The community college today can be viewed as comprehensive, providing a range of programs and services. The comprehensiveness of today's community college provides an opportunity for additional research on how the community college is viewed and perceived by the communities they serve. There may be a need to refocus some energy and efforts on re-examining the mission and purpose of the community college to see if they align with how the community perceives the work of the community college. The goal of this type of inquiry would be to contribute to a deeper understanding of the community college and the impact it has on the community. This type of inquiry could help community colleges align programs and services to address needs identified in this type of inquiry.

2. Mixed-methods inquiry exploring perceptions of the community college

Another suggested research opportunity that could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role and impact of the community college would be to increase mixed-methods inquiry of exploring perceptions of the community college. This would be an opportunity to incorporate quantitative methods and qualitative methods to study how the community college is perceived in the community. In doing so, this type of inquiry might lead to a stronger understanding of the perceived impact of the community college.

The mixed-methods approach is a recommendation because of the insights that this type of inquiry could produce. There is a continuous need to further develop the understanding of small, rural community colleges, particularly in a rapidly changing society producing changing demands on programs and services offered by the community college and state budget constraints. Perhaps a mixed-methods inquiry would result in data that

would offer an opportunity to analyze and explore perceptions using quantitative and qualitative questioning.

Additional research and study is needed in the areas of small, rural community colleges. As documented in recent articles published by the *Community College Daily* of the American Association of Community Colleges, rural communities continue to face challenges such as declining and aging populations, higher rates of poverty and unemployment, and a lack of workers with skills needed for jobs in rural areas. The small, rural community college has an opportunity to address the challenges facing rural communities. In the state of Iowa, this opportunity is visible through the development of the Future Ready Iowa initiative. Future Ready Iowa is a direct result of the state working to develop a long-term solution to addressing some of the challenges facing rural communities by utilizing the state's higher education system. Undoubtedly, Iowa community colleges will play a role in carrying out some of the goals and objectives of the Future Ready Iowa initiative, mainly to help seventy percent of Iowans to obtain post-secondary education by the year 2025.

Another factor leading to a need for additional research on small, rural community colleges is the idea that practitioners at institutions located in rural environments have different dimensions to their practice that urban practitioners do not. Future research may also examine the skillsets and knowledge needed by leadership in a small, rural community college versus an urban community college. Future research on the topic of small, rural community colleges needs to incorporate objectives that help rural community college practitioners further enhance their understanding of how the institution fits in and serves the rural community. One of the dimensions that a rural community college might experience is

that of being the sole provider of higher education in a rural community. Therefore, it would be prudent to focus on the impact of a rural community college on recruiting new business and industry. Additional studies focusing on this particular function of the rural community college could be of interest to policymakers and elected officials as well as those that lobby on behalf of and defend the work of rural community colleges.

Further research might also benefit from seeking the perspectives of those who are not identified as community leaders. In addition, future research could be conducted to explore how the level of interaction community members have with the community college influences their perceptions of its contributions. If the perceptions of community college contributions do not align with institutional mission or purpose, it would be worthwhile to investigate the course of and how to reduce the gap between the two.

Personal Reflection

When I started my undergraduate studies in the spring 1999 semester, I knew that I wanted to pursue a PhD at some point in my career. I have always loved higher education, I love college campuses and college towns, and the energy that they bring to the world. It was during my time in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, that I started to develop my love of the physical environment of the college campus and how the campus itself is a mechanism by which people carry out their dreams and ambitions.

In 2013, when I decided to pursue a Ph.D. degree, I knew that the purpose of this type of degree program was to learn research skills to be able to contribute to research in the field of higher education. I also knew that enrolling in a doctoral program would be a very challenging endeavor. Both of these statements remained true during my experience conducting this research study.

When I started the program in the fall 2014 semester, I did not have a clear idea of what this degree would hold for me in terms of career path. I did not want to be a college president – I made that clear. I was interested in moving up into a Dean's position and, perhaps, a Vice President's role, when the timing was right after acquiring more years of experience. What I did not know at the time, however, was how transformational this degree program experience is.

My Master of Arts degree is in the discipline of geography. It was during the second course of my doctoral program, while in class visiting a college campus in Des Moines, that I admitted to one of my classmates that I have a love for college campuses and how I interpret them as an expression of our culture, our values, our needs; how I am fascinated by what they represent to people – the deeper meaning that they hold for people. It was at this time that I started to develop my dissertation topic.

As a cultural geographer, I have developed a passion for communities that are a part of the fabric of our society. Small towns, big cities – all communities play a role in forming some piece of our society, giving people a place to create a home, make a living, recreate, and just be themselves. I am passionate about the experiences that people have, the relationships that people form with places, and the meaning behind all of that. This is the heart of what I try to do as a social scientist. This dissertation is the result of the blending of my skill set as a cultural geographer and a community college practitioner. When I started discussing the possible topic of a dissertation, I was clear that I wanted to study some aspect of the community college through a geographic lens in order to explore it differently and uniquely. That is how I settled on conducting a dissertation that would explore the role of the small community college as a contributor to quality of life in a rural community. And,

because I have a passion for communities, I wanted to go into actual communities and talk to people about this topic to hear their thoughts and perceptions. And the result of these conversations with people in communities became the data for this study.

One thing that has become clear to me is that the dissertation experience is a learning process for the researcher. The purpose of the dissertation is to give the researcher the opportunity to design a study and undertake the research process to conduct that study and write up the results. The dissertation is the chance for the researcher to learn and further practice the research skills acquired during doctoral seminar courses.

As a researcher and a human being, I have experienced growth during this process. I will have more opportunities to hone my skills as a researcher, practitioner, and geographer. This experience has contributed to my understanding of the world as a higher education practitioner, community college practitioner, human being, and researcher.

In thinking back on my experience during this process, I am amazed at the personal growth and development that I have experienced. This is a very humbling process, and I am honored to have the opportunity to participate in it. It also is a very challenging process that requires individual strength, like determination and perseverance, in order to achieve the end goal. As I advanced through the program to candidacy, I often found myself thinking back to my beginning college days as a first-generation college student. Back then, almost 20 years ago, I had to dig deep in my soul to find the strength and courage to keep moving forward when life and school became very difficult. And, now, as I finish this process, I found myself digging deep in my soul, again, looking for those same qualities that I needed as a first-generation college freshman. And I found them.

Looking ahead, this study will guide my work as a community college practitioner in higher education. There is much work to be done to continue to expand our understanding of the broad role and impact of the community college, and I seek to continue to explore that impact in future work. I view this work as strategic. In order to further strengthen community colleges, we need to deepen our understanding of the impact on the communities served. More importantly, there needs to be a more in-depth understanding of the impact of the community college on the people they serve so that the institutions have a greater awareness of their impact on individual lives.

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APPENDIX A. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202
Ames, Iowa 50014
515 294-4566

Date: 11/20/2017

To: Jared W Reed
2437 280th St.
Montrose, IA 52639

CC: Dr. Janice Friedel
N247F Lagomarcino Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Quality of life in a rural community: Perceptions of the role and contributions of the small, rural community college

IRB ID: 17-413

Study Review Date: 11/20/2017

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b) because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures with adults or observation of public behavior where
 - Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
 - Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The determination of exemption means that:

- **You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.**
- **You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application.** Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.

Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.

Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form. A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review. **Only the IRB or designees may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

Please be aware that **approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **An IRB determination of exemption in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

APPENDIX B. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: “Quality of life in a rural community: Perceptions of the role and contributions of the small, rural community college.”

Investigators: Jared W. Reed, M.A., Principal Investigator; Dr. Janice Nahra Friedel, Supervising Faculty, Iowa State University, Ames, IA

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore community leaders’ perceptions of the role of a small rural community college in contributing to quality of life in a rural community. This information will be used to develop insights into how the small, rural community college is perceived by individuals in the community, how individuals define ‘quality of life’ and how individuals view the role of the small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you have experience living and/or working in a small, rural, community and would be able to contribute insight into how quality of life exists and how the small, rural, community college contributes to quality of life in a rural community. You should not participate if you are below 18 years of age.

Description of Procedures

Two focus group interviews will be conducted at two different times but you only are being asked to participate in one.

- If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a focus group interview that will include 6-8 individuals from the same rural community who have similar experience as you living and/or working here and have some knowledge and/or experience with the community college here.
- You will be asked 8 questions related to what it means to be rural, rural communities, defining quality of life, and perceptions of the role of the small, rural community college in contributing to rural quality of life. Your participation will last for approximately 60 minutes.
- Participants will be audio recorded during the focus group interview. Before the final results of the study are presented, your identity will be concealed. No identifiable information will be published in this study.

Risks or Discomforts

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to participants in this study. The questions presented during the focus groups are not personal. The focus groups are designed to minimize the potential for power differentials among participants. If a participant wishes to decline answering a question during the focus group interview, the participant may do so.

Benefits

If you decide to participate in this study, there **will be no** direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by helping researchers further develop a better understanding of how quality of life exists in a rural community and what role the community college has in contributing to rural quality of life. The data collected from your participation in this study will be analyzed and insight will be gained from your responses to help better

understand the community college and perceptions of how the community college contributes to quality of life.

Costs and Compensation

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Participant Rights

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions *about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury*, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

Confidentiality

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the identities of individuals participating in the focus group interviews will be concealed. When the results of this study are written up, the identities of the individuals participating in the focus group interviews will be concealed. Each participant will be given a pseudonym to conceal his or her identity.

It will be necessary for the principal investigator to have the names of the individual participants and the job occupation/position in the community for individual participants. You will be asked to sign in and give a general brief (2-3 words) description of your role in the community. The principal investigator will have a record of the sign in documents. These documents will be scanned and uploaded to Cybox and the physical copies will be destroyed as soon as permitted under the law. The reason for the principal investigator to have your name and brief description of your role in the community is to help the principal investigator develop 1) a key that will be used to conceal your identity and 2) insight into individual responses during analysis of the data using the key. For example, instead of listing your specific job title with a specific organization, you may write down a 2-3 word broad, description (“business owner, city official, elected official, library employee, non-profit employee”). The principal investigator will maintain identities of individual participants using occupation information in order to develop a key. All identifiable information will be concealed, and participant responses will be coded, during transcription and analysis, using a coding system that will hide any identifiable information in the responses. All physical documents related to the data in this study will be stored in a locked drawer in the principal investigator’s home office. The only individual with access to this locked drawer is the principal investigator. All electronic files related to the data in this study (audio files, electronic transcripts) will be stored in using a secured cloud storage system called Cybox through Iowa State University. All electronic files will be deleted immediately from all electronic devices after upload to Cybox is confirmed. Once electronic files have been uploaded for transcription, and transcription is completed, electronic files will be deleted from Cybox as soon as possible.

Questions

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information *about the study*, contact Jared W. Reed, principal investigator, at jwreed@iastate.edu and/or 319-316-2289 or Dr. Janice Nahra Friedel, supervising faculty, at jfriedel@iastate.edu and/or 515-294-4719.

Consent and Authorization Provisions

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

Participant's Signature

Date

APPENDIX C. RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

My name is Jared Reed and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at Iowa State University. As part of the PhD program, I am conducting a research study on the perceptions of the role of a small, rural community college in contributing to quality of life in a rural community. The purpose of this study is to better understand quality of life in a rural community and how the small, rural community college contributes to quality of life in a rural community. I'm approaching you because I am interested in asking for your participation in a focus group interview about how you perceive quality of life in a rural community and how the community college might contribute to quality of life in a rural community. The study is designed as a case study of individuals and you have been identified as a person who could provide me with information based on your experience living and working in this rural community. If you are willing and available to participate, you will be participating in a focus group interview of 6-8 people. Your identity shall remain confidential and all information you share shall be documented under a pseudonym in the final study.

The interview will last approximately one hour. Your participation would be completely voluntary, and you would be free to choose not to answer any question you did not want to answer and/or leave the study at any time with no penalty.

Are you interested in participating in this research?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you.

APPENDIX D. FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction:

Good evening, my name is Jared Reed. I am a doctoral candidate in higher education at Iowa State University. I am conducting a dissertation study titled “Quality of life in a rural community: perceptions of the role and contributions of the small rural community college.” This focus group is being conducted in accordance with the Institutional Review Board application on file with Iowa State University. Participants here have given informed consent to participate in this focus group. Participants have agreed to be audio recorded in this focus group interview. In accordance with the Institutional Review Board application, identity will be concealed throughout the research project. As principal investigator, I have list of eight questions that I will ask the group. Let’s begin.

Interview Questions:

1. How would you define “rural”?
2. How would you define a “rural community”?
3. How would you define “quality of life”?
4. How does quality of life exist in Southeast Iowa?
5. What do you see as the strengths, weaknesses of the community college today?
6. Tell me about the ways in which you perceive the community college contributing to “quality of life”?
7. Describe your perception of the relationship between the community and the community college today.
8. Are there any other comments or thoughts that you haven’t shared yet that you would like to?